



Legend of the Five Rings™



THE PHOENIX

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PROLOGUE

ASHES

The shugenja stood on the ridge above Kyuden Bayushi and watched his life go up in smoke. Pillars of flame shot through the roof of the ancestral home of the Scorpion. Fire ran along the castle's elegant balconies, destroying their hidden supports, sending them tumbling to the courtyards far below. Great sparks flew up where they fell.

The lone figure clenched his fists so tightly that his long fingernails drew blood from his palms. He felt the magic in that blood as it dripped from his hands and fell to the trembling earth. His samurai heart burned. He was one of the most powerful shugenja in the land—a master of spells and subterfuge, a slayer of men, a defender of his clan's honor. Yet he felt powerless watching the carnage below.

In the distance, fierce battles raged, both within the castle walls and without. Figures whirled and shouted in the fire and smoke. Horses charged. Samurai rode down all men

who opposed them. Women and children died, too. Everyone who wore the red and black mon, the symbol of the Scorpion, became targets for the purge. The cries of the dying echoed through the hills. The nearby River of Gold ran red with blood.

The kami of war had pitted clan against clan. The spell-master's clan, the great house of the Scorpion, was losing. They had fought a bloody retreat ever since the death of their leader, Bayushi Shoji—the finest samurai the world had ever known.

Far off, in the great city of Otosan Uchi, Emperor Hantei the 39th sat upon his sundered throne and smiled. Even across the leagues, the shugenja could feel the young emperor's pleasure at the noble Scorpions' fall. The god-descended boy despot laughed at the destruction of the spell-master's people.

The young Hantei had married Kachiko, the Mother of Scorpions, after Shoji died. Now the boy stole everything else from them as well—land, titles, riches, honor, even their name itself. The young tyrant had disbanded the Scorpion,

struck their name from the histories of Rokugan. Shoji had died to save the empire, and *this* was his people's reward.

Fire. Death. Oblivion.

The Scorpion would lose this final battle, the shugenja knew. Then his people would be gone, burnt to the ground like blight-stricken fields.

The shugenja shuddered, despite the warmth of the day, and pulled his crimson and black kimono snugly around his thin body. His hands clutched his precious cache of scrolls—the last remnants of Scorpion knowledge and power. Deep in his soul, he longed to join the fight. He yearned to be with his brethren on the field before the great castle, spilling the blood of their enemies.

A dozen deadly conjurations flashed before his mind. Mystic chants drummed in his ears. The power of the words rumbled in the bloodstained soil. Perhaps, the shugenja thought, he could turn the tide of the battle. Under his command, his people might rally and win the day. If not, at least he would die a samurai's death on the field of battle.

But, no. The great daimyo Bayushi Shoji had given the shugenja a task, and Yogo Junzo knew he must see his duty through to the bitter end. "Protect the scrolls," Lord Shoji had said. "Keep them safe, for with their opening, the end of the world is upon us."

Junzo, the dying clan's foremost shugenja, looked at the scroll case in his arms. It was plain—a small chest giving no hint of the great powers contained within.

Long ago, the world had nearly been destroyed by the evil god Fu Leng. Great kami—Seven Thunders—had risen up to

battle the Evil One. The Thunders destroyed Fu Leng's power using twelve Black Scrolls. Now the Evil One slept the endless sleep. The godlike Thunders had long since vanished from the world of Rokugan.

The Scorpion, masters of all secrets, had been charged with protecting the scrolls against the day of Fu Leng's return. For a thousand years, the clan carried out their sacred duty. Six scrolls had been lost to the ravages of time and war. The other six, though ...

Junzo clutched four of those remaining six scrolls to his breast. He held their case tight against his body, as if to shield himself from the carnage on the plain below. Junzo would do as Shoju commanded: He would guard these scrolls with his life. Their dark magic would not fall into the hands of the Scorpions' enemies.

Junzo suspected the location of the final two scrolls as well—though retrieving them would be difficult, especially during this hellish purge. The shugenja would have to rescue those scrolls before anyone else discovered them, before any less worthy, less wise clan opened the scrolls and used them.

Use them.... Use the Black Scrolls....

Use them to what end? Junzo wondered. To bring the end of the world?

The shugenja gazed at the slaughter below. Black smoke wafted up to the ridge and stung his eyes, making them tear. Through the fires, it seemed demons danced among his dying people. The Scorpion would soon be extinct. Surely, this *was* the end of the world. Nothing could be worse. Nothing.

Dark thoughts welled up in Junzo's mind. Before, he had always brushed these apocalyptic notions aside. There would be another day, another battle—surely the tide would turn in their favor. Surely the Scorpion would triumph in the end.

For months, Junzo had watched the slaughter. For months, he had done nothing, following the command of his dead daimyo. The spell-master had done his duty, but his faithfulness had not been rewarded. Instead, the kami and their accursed emperor had destroyed everything he held dear. As he watched the carved parapets of Kyuden Bayushi fall to fire and destruction, Junzo realized the tide would *never* turn. This was, indeed, the end.

The end of his people. The end of his world.

An idea clawed up from the darkness in the back of his mind. He'd heard the thought before, but he'd always ignored it. His sense of duty and honor had suppressed the notion until it was no more than a black spider, crawling in the deepest recesses of his soul. Now, though, the idea wound its clinging web around his sanity and reason. The spider in Junzo's brain drew the net tight.

You have the power! his mind whispered. *Use it!*

Junzo looked at the precious burden cradled in his arms. The scroll chest was opaque, lacquered black and blazed with the mon of the Scorpion. It showed no trace of the artifacts hidden inside. Yet, to Junzo's gaze, the case became suddenly transparent. He saw the Black Scrolls housed within. He felt the pulse of their ancient power.

The energy of the Black Scrolls throbbed within his arms. He held the power: power enough to save his people or, at the

very least, to make their enemies pay.

The topmost scroll called to the shugenja, its voice sweet like a geisha's. "Wield me," it said, "and I will make *you* emperor. You shall sit upon a throne of your enemies' skulls. You will command an army such as the world has never known. Take my power! Use it!"

Junzo's hands trembled, though he couldn't tell whether with fear or rage. The strength to destroy his enemies rested within his arms. Why should he not wield it? Who was he saving that power for?

Bayushi Shojū was dead. There wasn't another man worthy to wield such power in all of Rokugan.

Only him. Junzo. The fate of the Scorpion—*his* people—rested with him.

He set the scroll case down on the dying grass at his feet. Blood pounded like thunder in his head as he gently opened the black lacquered container.

A small sound, like a sigh, shook the chest. In his mind, Junzo heard a scream louder than all the battles and death in the valley below. He blinked once, twice. The scream died away. Junzo drew the topmost scroll from the case.

The heavy silk was black and wrinkled like the skin of a long-dead corpse. As he looked at the silk, Junzo imagined he saw faces in the furrows—hideous, tormented faces.

Junzo repressed a shudder. He seized the top of the scroll with one hand and rolled it open.

Kanji symbols leapt like green fire off the page and burned into his eyes. Junzo tried to scream, but couldn't. His mouth was already reading the scroll aloud.

The power of the scroll burrowed into his brain and wrapped itself around his spine. Junzo felt as though he was being burned alive. His flesh tingled and seared. He tried to put the scroll down, but his fingers wouldn't obey him. They tightly clutched the tortured silk. Without his volition, his mouth continued to read.

Junzo felt himself being torn apart, ripped down to the very fiber of his being. His muscles, his sinews, his nerves were flayed from his bones. His eyes boiled and exploded. His soul burned to ash. A vortex of screams surrounded him, the obscene music of the damned. Then, in the midst of darkness and pain, Junzo and the scroll became one.

He reveled in the power of the first Black Scroll as it swept out across the battlefield, across the mountains, across all of Roku-gan. It stained the land dark with its touch, as dark as coal, black with plague.

His virulence wormed inside the souls of hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands. The power of his scroll ravished the land, reaching into every nook and cranny, spreading black spores. Junzo's bitter scream transformed into a joyous cackle. The power no longer pained him; now it thrilled him. He laughed as magic coursed through his body, corrupting all it touched, spreading its sinister taint throughout the Emerald Empire.

Junzo wasn't alone anymore. Now he had allies all across the land, allies who lurked in the darkness, waiting, allies who would support his cause—champion his revenge. Not vengeance for the Scorpion, not for his devastated clan, not

for his slain Yogo brothers. Revenge for *him*, for *Junzo*.
Retribution for all the wrongs ever committed against him.

He, Junzo, would set the world right.

How foolish he had been to set his stock in mortal men. Even Bayushi Shojū paled beside Fu Leng. Fu Leng would be the shugenja's ally now; the two of them would sweep Rokugan clean of human pestilence.

In an instant, Junzo's mind rushed back across time and space. His ravaged body shuddered as though struck by lightning. His soul had returned. He felt the power of the Black Scroll in his sinews, in his very bones. His wizened carcass seemed almost too fragile to contain the great energies he now possessed.

Junzo looked down over the battlefield. No longer did he see friends dying, enemies killing them. Now he saw only ants: ants to be squashed under his heel. He smiled. The skin of his face cracked and peeled.

The shugenja rolled the scroll up once more. He placed it with its brethren and retrieved the black chest from where it lay at his feet. New purpose and determination filled his mind. The lost scrolls could wait; these four would serve him for now. There would be time to fetch the others later, once he had mastered his new abilities.

Now, though, he would find a place to gather his strength—a place strong with Fu Leng's dark energy. He would discover a cynosure from which to consolidate his power. He would retreat there while his might grew and his new disciples flocked to him. He had more reading to do.

Much more reading.

The creature who had recently been Yogo Junzo smiled once more. Then he turned his back on the battlefield and vanished into the bloodstained hills.

UNDER FIRE

Isawa Tadaka jumped back, his sword flashing through the air. The demon met him, raking with its talons, but found only the silk of Tadaka's red and black kimono. The blade of Tadaka's katana slashed across the chest of the Oni no Byoki, cutting the demon's festering skin. Black blood splashed from the wound, spurting corruption toward the samurai.

With a flick of his wrist, Tadaka opened his jade fan. The demon blood splattered against it and ignited. Small puffs of greasy black smoke stained the warm afternoon air. Behind his silken hood Tadaka, the Phoenix Master of Earth, smiled.

The oni lunged at him, and he spun out of its way, behind a small stone obelisk. The pillar showed the rough outline of some nature kami—perhaps Fudo, one of the eight patrons of life. The momentary smile faded from Tadaka's face. Once, this had been a natural shrine, a sanctuary against evil. Now the

minions of Fu Leng had fouled it beyond salvation.

The distraction nearly cost Tadaka his life. Plague zombies, companions of the oni, shambled from the nearby woods. They clawed at Tadaka with their pestilent talons. The Master of Earth spun away. One scratch could poison him with a disease that took first life, and then soul.

The creatures attacked with purpose, as if listening to the unvoiced commands of the oni that had spawned them. The

zombies closed in, trying to force the Master of Earth into the arms of their progenitor.

Tadaka heard the song of earth. He spread his arms and turned in a circle. Around him the dry earth splashed up, ringing Tadaka in a wave of dust and small stones. The debris blinded the oni and its minions. The plague-ridden creatures clutched at their eyes. Tadaka sprinted toward a gap in their line.

Blindly, one of the zombies lashed out and caught Tadaka's kimono in its hand. The Master of Earth pulled away, but he lost his footing on the loose dirt and fell. The scabrous zombie loomed over him, blinking its black eyes. A smile cracked its rotted face. Tadaka scrambled back across the ground as the zombie reached forward with its deadly claws.

Suddenly, though, the creature stopped. It gurgled and fell over, half of its body toppling to the right and the other half to the left. Both halves quivered, unwilling to give up their fight, but unable to reach their prey. Behind the bisected monster stood the figure of a samurai, the blade of his katana dripping gore.

The late afternoon sun shone in Tadaka's eyes, but he recognized his savior anyway: Shiba Ujimitsu—the Phoenix Champion. Ujimitsu smiled briefly, and then spun away to confront another plague zombie.

Hope and pride welled up within Tadaka's soul. He called to the earth; it lifted him up, setting him gently on his feet once more. A fist-sized rock settled into his hand.

The Master of Earth turned as the Oni no Byoki charged him again. Tadaka flung the rock at the creature. The stone shot through the air as if fired from a bow. It hit the monster in

the side, shattering several ribs and tearing a fist-sized chunk of flesh from just above the monster's hip. The demon bellowed with rage, but the blow didn't stop it.

Tadaka ducked under the creature's flailing arms. He placed his straw sandal on the oni's rump and pushed. The monster tumbled to the ground. Tadaka scampered back, toward the small obelisk. He put the stone between himself and the oni once more as the demon rose. Tadaka took a moment to regain his breath.

Over his shoulder, the Master of Earth glimpsed Ujimitsu fighting the plague zombies. The Phoenix Champion whirled and danced, a red and orange flame in the afternoon sunlight. Zombies shambled toward him, hideous piles of oozing virulence. The champion's sword separated undead limbs from bodies. The samurai's handsome face wore a mask of grim determination.

Tadaka dodged around the obelisk, playing cat and mouse with his demonic foe. The Oni no Byoki lunged across the obelisk at Tadaka. The Master of Earth seized the moment. He reached out with his spirit, touching forces deep within the stone. Awakened, the rock did its master's bidding. It shuddered and sprang into the sky, growing to three times the samurai's height.

The obelisk pierced the oni's chest and carried the plague-ridden demon toward Amaterasu, the sun goddess. The monster cried out, a horrible, flatulent sound. It twisted on the stone pillar like a fly on a pin. Its black blood oozed in great streams down the sides of the stone.

Satisfied that the oni could do no more harm, Tadaka drew his katana and turned to help the Phoenix Champion.

Five zombies surrounded Ujimitsu. All had lost limbs, but the wounds didn't lessen the monsters' desire to kill. They shambled forward on blistered feet, mockeries of the people they had once been.

The Phoenix Champion smiled a grim smile and raised his sword above his head. A voice in his mind whispered the secret of the zombies' destruction. Ujimitsu listened carefully. The voice had never failed him.

As quick as lightning, Ujimitsu struck off the head of the nearest zombie. Foul blood oozed from the creature's neck; it fell and moved no more. Heedless of their comrade's destruction, the others zombies pressed in. Their skin festered with black boils. The air stank from their rotting flesh.

Another voice warned Ujimitsu to beware the plague zombies' touch. Obviously. Sometimes he wished the voices would just shut up and let him fight.

Ujimitsu sprang high into the air, arcing backward over the nearest zombie. The one-armed creature tried to grab the Phoenix as he leapt, but it misjudged the distance. The champion landed lightly on his feet in the withered grass behind the zombie. His katana flashed and decapitated the monstrosity.

Tadaka rejoined the fight. His blade took the head of another plague zombie. The creature's body whirled, as if to face the warrior shugenja, and then fell lifeless to the parched earth. The broken limbs landed with a hideous, damp sound.

For a moment, the two remaining zombies seemed confused. The shrieks of their dying master, still impaled on the obelisk, distracted them. They stumbled into each other.

Acting by silent agreement, both Phoenix warriors sprinted forward. Their katanas flashed simultaneously. The skull of the zombie Tadaka fought sailed through the air and smashed against the bottom of the gore-covered obelisk. The head of Ujimitsu's foe toppled to the ground and rolled until it hit a small clump of dry grass. The creature's brains oozed out of its ears, and its lifeless eyes stared at the afternoon sun.

The samurai nodded at each other and then turned toward the demon, still struggling on its stone spike. Tadaka sang a blessing to send the demon back to the underworld of Jigoku. The warrior shugenja's chant filled the afternoon air, echoing off ancient pines. The oni shrank before the incantation's power. Its festering sores shriveled; its bones dried like twigs; its blood turned to dust.

Ujimitsu strode forward, his brow furrowed with concentration. His sword described a graceful arc and sliced through the oni's neck. The creature's head shattered into black dust as it hit the sun-baked earth.

The Phoenix Champion flicked the gore from his blade in the ancient shiburi movement. Tadaka did the same. The Master of Earth chanted a purification spell over both katana before he and Ujimitsu resheathed their weapons. With a snap of his wrist, Tadaka closed his jade fan.

Ujimitsu let out a long sigh. "A bad business," he said. He adjusted his red and orange kimono and checked himself for wounds. He found none. Even the delicate featherlike designs of his silk robes seemed unruffled by the fight.

Tadaka nodded. "Yes, but well and quickly disposed of. Nothing left but the cleaning up." He used the top of his fan to push his pointed straw hat up on his forehead. The wide,

round brim settled back, and sunlight streamed down on Tadaka's stern face. The rocks that hung in small settings around the hat's brim rattled and clacked and whispered the song of stone.

Ujimitsu almost fancied he could see his friend's features behind the concealing hood—almost. "Shall I fetch the eta from the village?" the Phoenix Champion asked.

Tadaka shook his head. "No," he said. "Though dead, these creatures might still infect them. I wouldn't let seven unclean eta touch these abominations."

Ujimitsu nodded. "I recognize one of these zombies—the last one I slew. Her name was Miori. She lived in the village at the bottom of the hill and often came to tend this shrine."

"Probably that devotion is what led to her death," Tadaka said. He looked around the small clearing, appraising the damage and adjusting his loose-fitting red and black kimono. He tucked his fan into one wide sleeve.

The preternaturally tall obelisk stood in the center of the clearing, its worn stone surface carved with the kami's likeness and ancient prayers. It stood serenely, oblivious to the demon blood running down its sides. Nearby the remains of a small shrine, made of bamboo and painted wood, slumped listlessly. The pristine trees of Mori Isawa, the sacred wood of the Phoenix, ringed the scene, silent witnesses to the violence just ended.

The swollen bodies of the twice-dead zombies littered the ground like giant bags of black ooze. Already flies buzzed around the corpses.

Tadaka frowned. His heart sank that he and Ujimitsu had brought such carnage to this peaceful setting. The clearing would never be the same. Its shrine could never be made holy again. Tadaka felt he'd lost a piece of his soul.

As if echoing his kinsman's thoughts, Ujimitsu said, "I used to like this place."

Tadaka nodded. "As did I. What brought you here in such a timely fashion? Chasing the minions of the Evil One within our fair land?"

Ujimitsu shook his head. "Hardly," he said. "I was just passing through."

Behind his hood, Tadaka smiled. "I doubt that," he said. "Only yesterday reports came that you were fighting ogres in Kiken na Roka. The day before that, I heard you were saving villagers at Doro Owari Mura. Both places are a long way from here."

Ujimitsu shrugged. "Those reports are exaggerated. People seem to have trouble keeping track of me. The peasants see my face everywhere, even where I'm not. Besides," he said with a smile, "I travel quickly."

Tadaka laughed. "With the wings of the Phoenix, I'd say. And you don't even look tired."

"How could one tire of our glorious homeland?" Ujimitsu said, smiling broadly now. "Chalk it up to clean living and the grace of Amaterasu, if you like."

"So you were just passing through, then?" Tadaka said.

"Honestly," Ujimitsu replied, nodding. "Miori's grandmother stopped me in the road. She said her granddaughter had journeyed to this shrine two days ago and had not returned. Now we know why." He sighed. "I will hate to tell her of the girl's fate."

"The Evil One's talons have grown," Tadaka said, "to strike so deep within our lands."

Ujimitsu cocked his head. A voice whispered something to him, but he ignored it. "You think, then," he said to Tadaka, "that the oni came to this shrine on purpose, to spread Fu Leng's plague?"

"What else?" Tadaka said. "Even as their dead master sleeps, Fu Leng's servants work his will. Either Junzo—may the sun burn the flesh from his bones—sent the creature to do Fu Leng's bidding, or the shugenja's foul spells tainted some peasant, allowing the oni to acquire a body to live in. Who can say which? These other victims, though, were probably simple peasants—devoted people, like your Miori."

Ujimitsu nodded. "I wish I'd come sooner."

Tadaka laughed darkly. "Even *you* can't be everywhere at once."

Ujimitsu sighed and nodded. "What brought *you* to this place, Master of Earth?"

"I've been in the mountains," Tadaka replied, "meditating—seeking the wisdom of the earth. I thought to stop at this shrine on my way back home."

"It is a dark omen," Ujimitsu said.

"One of many. This place must be cleansed."

"Should I summon a priest?"

"Not even Shinsei himself could wash away this stain," Tadaka said gravely. "The earth must purge itself of the Evil One's blight." His eyes rolled back in his head, and he began to chant. His voice filled the clearing with deep, resonant sound.

Ujimitsu felt a soft rumbling beneath his feet, like the purring of a great cat. Even through the soles of his zori sandals, the Phoenix Champion felt warmth. A pale glow emanated from the obelisk and the bare earth beneath it. He smiled and nodded.

"I'll leave you to it, then," he said. "I'll scout the area, make sure it's abomination-free." Tadaka didn't reply. Already he was deep within the magic.

Ujimitsu glanced back over his shoulder as he hiked into the woods. Even now the earth glowed red, beginning to burn. He shook his head and sighed. The tall pines of Mori Isawa closed in around him, shielding the samurai from sight of the clearing. The cool embrace of the wood restored a measure of the Phoenix Champion's serenity.

He knew of a clear, swift stream running across this path only a short distance uphill. Ujimitsu hoped the water might wash the taste of death from his mouth. A voice in his head whispered, *Soon the taste will be so great that all the seas in the world will not be able to wash it away.*

Ujimitsu nodded, and spoke out loud in reply. "You speak my fears," he said. "Fu Leng is returning to Rokugan, and Junzo is his herald."

You must fight him, another voice urged.

"With a thousand years experience, what else *could* I do?" Ujimitsu asked, shrugging.

You should take the battle to the Evil One, a third voice said.

"No," said Ujimitsu. "I'm just a simple warrior. *This* is my place; to protect our people is my duty. I'm no wise man, no shugenja, no priest. I'm merely samurai. The Elemental Masters must decide when to bring war to the Evil One."

He reached the stream, knelt down, and took a long drink. Quenched, he looked at his reflection.

"The Elemental Masters?" he saw his reflection ask. The face in the water frowned. "Those bloodless pacifists? Hidden in their libraries, they will read until the end of the world!"

Ujimitsu dashed his hand into the stream, shattering the reflection into tumbling beads of water.

"Tadaka is not hidden in a library," he said to himself. "He will know when the time for action has come. To strike too soon is often worse than not to strike at all."

The voices—the Soul of Shiba—said nothing in return.

Ujimitsu took two small flasks from his obi, filled them with water, and then returned the containers to his belt. Tadaka will be thirsty once his work is done, the Phoenix Champion thought.

He stood and looked around. The gentle burble of water filled the sacred forest. Pines towered overhead, shielding

the stream from the afternoon sun and dappling the woods with green and yellow light.

Rocks of all sizes lined the streambed, beautiful white stones speckled with red and black and flecks of sparkling mica. These placid banks seemed very far from the clearing and the desecrated shrine. If he listened carefully, though, Ujimitsu could hear Tadaka's purification chant drifting through the trees.

The samurai sighed. He chose a tall, flat rock by the side of the stream and sat down. He took a deep breath of the moist air and exhaled it slowly. Life is a series of battles with small snatches of rest in between. The thought played quietly in his mind, though Ujimitsu didn't know if it was his own or his ancestors'.

He ran his hand over the smooth stone—cool, even in the summer heat, and damp with spray. Upstream, the stones became larger, like petrified animals come to drink. The champion enjoyed the play of light over the shapes. He smiled and stood.

"Shiba Ujimitsu ..." a deep voice said.

The Phoenix Champion spun, his katana already in his hand.

A shape emerged from the rocks upstream. The figure was dark, like the shadows themselves, and tall. He wore a deep red cloak that, even at a distance, couldn't conceal his deformity. The way the cloak hung on his body was wrong, twisted. It flapped vacantly beneath his right shoulder. The figure lifted his head slightly, and a scarred face showed behind the hood. Once, the man had been handsome, but not now.

Ujimitsu recognized him immediately. "Ujina," the Phoenix Champion said, only slightly relieved.

"You know I've lost that name," the shugenja said quietly. "Though I still serve, my name must not be spoken."

Ujimitsu let the arm holding his katana drop to his side. "I thought it more polite than calling you the Nameless One."

"Names or lack of names are meaningless to me," the Nameless One said. "Even politeness does not mean what it did."

"Did you come to see Tadaka?" Ujimitsu asked. "He's back at the shrine."

"No, Shiba Ujimitsu," the Nameless One said, "I came to see you." As the two of them talked, the shugenja had been making his way downstream to where Ujimitsu stood. Now he stopped, just a few paces away from the samurai.

As hard as he looked, Ujimitsu could not see the Nameless One's eyes beneath his hood. "I thought you were in Kyuden Isawa," the Phoenix Champion finally said.

"Like you, I travel where I'm needed," the Nameless One replied.

Don't trust him! the Soul of Shiba whispered in Ujimitsu's mind. Ujimitsu ignored it. "And you're needed here, now?" he asked. The fine hairs on the back of the samurai champion's neck rose. Could there be further dangers lurking in the sacred wood?

"Needed only briefly," the Nameless One said. He sat down on the rock where Ujimitsu had rested moments before. "I've

come with a warning."

"I'm listening."

"Tell our family that they must cast off their pacifist ways," the Nameless One said. His soft, rich voice filled the air when he spoke. "If they do not, the world is doomed."

"Doomed how?"

The Nameless One shifted uneasily on his perch. "You know, of course, that Yogo Junzo now serves the Evil One. What you do not know is how far he has gone. Junzo is opening the Black Scrolls."

A cold chill ran up Ujimitsu's spine. "No."

The shugenja nodded. "Yes. He seeks to hasten Fu Leng's return to the world. The scrolls will give him that power. He won't stop until his undead master strides across the lands of Rokugan once more."

"Can we stop him?" Ujimitsu asked.

"Not now. His power is too great. He is too well hidden in the Shadowlands. The creatures there do his bidding. Only by casting off their torpor can the Phoenix hope to fight him."

Ujimitsu willed his heart to stop pounding. The voices in his head, the Soul of Shiba, whirled angrily, each striving to be heard. One voice won out. "How do you know this?" the Phoenix Champion asked, his eyes narrowing.

The Nameless One stood. "My ... situation allows me to go places that are difficult for other men. I hear things even the

wise do not. You don't have to trust me, though. You can discover the truth of my words on your own."

"Will you help us fight this evil?" Ujimitsu asked.

"As I can," the man who had been Ujina replied. "Though I have other... obligations as well. Now, those commitments take me elsewhere. Relay my message to Tadaka and the others."

Ujimitsu nodded.

The Nameless One turned and walked back upstream. This time, rather than picking his way among the rocks, he flowed around them like an insubstantial specter.

Ujimitsu started up the path, but said, "Why don't you take this message to Tadaka yourself?" When he turned, the Nameless One had vanished. The question hung in the air as Ujimitsu trotted back up the path.

He saw the clearing before he reached it. Brilliant white light—nearly as bright as the sun—poured through the woods, casting long shadows on the mossy ground. Ujimitsu had to shield his eyes, but he heard Tadaka's song ahead of him and pressed on.

As he reached the edge of the clearing, the chant ended. The white light leapt suddenly into the sky and vanished. An awesome silence fell on the wood.

Tadaka slumped to his knees.

The center of the clearing had been scorched in a wide circle. Within that ring only barren earth and the stone obelisk remained. The obelisk had returned to its original

size, though it still glowed red with cleansing magic. Waves of heat rose off the ground, dancing in the air like transparent snakes. No trace of the zombies, the demon, or even the small bamboo shrine remained. A grim smile seemed to play across the weatherworn face of the obelisk.

Ujimitsu walked to the edge of the purified circle and knelt down beside his friend. He took one of the water flasks from his obi, unstopped it, and put it in Tadaka's hand.

Tadaka raised it to his lips and drank. When he'd drained the flask, he turned to Ujimitsu and said, "Thank you, my friend."

Ujimitsu nodded. The two of them stood. When Tadaka faltered, Ujimitsu helped him up.

The Master of Earth brushed a fine dust off his kimono. His face dripped with sweat. "The taint is banished," he said.

Ujimitsu bowed. "Thank you," he said. "For myself, the village beyond, and our people."

Tadaka bowed in return. For a moment, they stood in silence. Then, Ujimitsu said, "I saw your father."

"What?" Tadaka said. "When?"

"On the path," said Ujimitsu. "Just a few moments past."

Behind his hood, Tadaka frowned. "What did he want?"

"He said he wanted to warn us—to warn the clan. He said that Yogo Junzo had opened the Black Scrolls and that we Phoenix need to cast off our pacifist ways to fight him."

Tadaka drew a sharp breath. "Do you believe him?"

Ujimitsu shook his head. "I know that he's become strange since . . . since his troubles, but, yes—I think he was telling the truth—or as much of the truth as suited his purpose."

"Then we must summon the Council of Five," Tadaka said.

"I agree," said Ujimitsu. "Only your fellow Elemental Masters have the wisdom to discover the truth in this matter."

Tadaka almost laughed. "As always, we would welcome the council of Shiba," he said.

"I'm only a simple warrior," Ujimitsu replied.

"A warrior, yes," Tadaka said, "but simple ... ? Never. Come, we must return to Kyuden Isawa as quickly as we can."

Ujimitsu nodded. "You go on ahead," he said. "I'll catch up."

Tadaka looked at his friend and arched his eyebrows. "Why?" he asked.

"I have to tell an old woman about the fate of her granddaughter."

AWAKENING

t^^^ammmmmmm^^mmmmmmmmmmmmrn: 1

Isawa Kaede awoke in darkness, a scream clutching her throat. She sat bolt upright on her futon, the silk of her quilt falling softly from her body. For a moment, she couldn't remember where she was.

She gasped a breath, held it, and forced calm into her mind. Otosan Uchi. She was in her bedchamber in Otosan Uchi, the Imperial Capital.

Her eyes scanned the darkened room: low tables, flower vases, a small cabinet—all just shadows. She focused, calling the power up within her mind. The room brightened in her sight, but she saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Just her chambers. No hidden menace, nothing.

Her eyes fell to a spot on the futon next to where she sat. No familiar head on the pillow beside her. Not even after all these years. Nothing.

Kaede let out a long, slow sigh.

An emptiness welled up within her breast, not the tranquil emptiness of the Void, but an emptiness that spoke of dreams unfulfilled.

Yes, she was Phoenix Mistress of the Void, one of the most powerful shugenja in all of Rokugan. Yes, she sat upon the council of Elemental Masters with her brothers and kinsmen. And yes, she held the ear of Emperor Hantei the 39th.

This last thought made her shudder, and she chided herself for it. To be the emperor's trusted advisor was one of the highest honors a samurai could strive for. To save the emperor's life, as she had done during the Scorpion's rebellion, was more than any servant of Amaterasu could hope for.

She knew she should be happy, content. Indeed, the Void Mistress portion of her soul *was* happy. Her spirit, though, ached with the deep toll her devotions had taken. The new

emperor, only a boy when his father had died, had stripped her fiancé Akodo Toturi of his lands and title, stripped the Akodo of their name.

True, she did not know Toturi well—they had been betrothed as children. It was also true that Toturi had taken the Emerald Throne after slaying the assassin fiend Bayushi Shōju. However, Toturi did so because he believed the Hantei heir had been killed. He didn't know that Kaede and Seppun Ishikawa had spirited the boy out of the Forbidden City and into Phoenix lands.

Kaede was willing to forgive her fiancé for his sins, but the new emperor was not. The logical part of Kaede couldn't blame the boy. He had lost his father, his friends, almost everything, before regaining the throne. Her spirit, however, wept silently at the sight of her empty bed.

Kaede pulled the quilt around her bare shoulders. She reached out with her mind, touching the Void all around her. Soon she felt better.

She let the quilt fall from her body, stood, and went to the low chest standing against one wall of the room. She opened the top, pulled out a padded kimono spangled with bird designs, and wrapped it around herself. The cool silk quickly warmed against her skin.

A shadow fell across the floor of the room. Kaede jumped, and a small gasp escaped her lips. Then she realized it was only the silhouette of a cloud crossing the moon. Moonlight filtered through the shoji, the many-paned paper wall on the room's south side, and painted the wooden floor blue and white. The wind blew briskly outside, sending the cloud shadows fleeing across the room like mice.

Kaede slipped a pair of sandals on her feet and crossed to the door of the room.

The door was a paper *fiisuma* screen, brilliantly painted with pictures of birds, mountains, and waterfalls. Kaede admired it for a moment before sliding it open.

Darkness reigned in the hall outside. In the distance, around a corner, a lantern burned, shedding pale light through its white paper panes. Kaede looked down the hall in both directions and was surprised when a figure stepped from the shadows.

She almost retreated into her room before she realized who it was: Seppun Ishikawa, her friend and frequent companion. She smiled at him. A worried look played across his rugged face. He wore a blue kimono rather than his usual armor, as if he'd just gotten out of bed. He carried his *daisho* swords in his left hand. As one of the emperor's guardsmen, Ishikawa was in charge of security for this wing of the palace. His room was not far from Kaede's.

"What's wrong?" he whispered to her.

"Nothing," she replied. "Why did you think anything was wrong?"

"I heard something," he said, concern still playing on his face. "It sounded like you were in trouble."

Kaede smiled and put a hand to her full lips. "Honestly, Ishikawa," she said, trying not to laugh, "I sometimes think you'd come running if I sneezed."

Ishikawa shifted uncomfortably. He tucked his swords into his *obi* and folded his arms across his broad chest.

Seeing that she'd hurt him, Kaede reached out and gently touched his elbow. "I'm sorry," she said. "I had some trouble sleeping. I didn't mean to wake you."

"All right," he said, almost touching her hand with his own.

"I'm glad it was nothing more. Why don't we both go back to bed?"

She felt the warmth of his hand, so close to hers. The perception sent a thrill up Kaede's spine, and some of the loneliness inside her slipped away. She shook her head. "No," she said. "I'd rather walk right now."

"In the middle of the night?" Ishikawa said skeptically.

She nodded. "Yes. Just for a bit."

"Then I'll walk with you," he said. He withdrew his hand and looked around. "Where are we going?"

"Nowhere. Everywhere."

Ishikawa chuckled, a low, pleasant sound like surf on a distant beach. "Are we walking into the Void, then?" he asked.

"We are always walking in the Void," Kaede replied.

Ishikawa laughed again. "Serves me right for trying to match words with the Mistress of the Void." He pointed down the corridor past his room.

She nodded her assent, and they walked quietly together, close, but not touching. They headed toward the center of the great palace, passing sentries as they went. At first, the

guards seemed nervous to see anyone walking so late at night. They settled down, though, when they recognized Ishikawa.

After a time, Ishikawa said, "Why did you have trouble sleeping? Bad dreams?"

Kaede nodded and looked up at him. "I don't remember the dream exactly—just shadows and dark omens. I think my father may have been there, too."

Ishikawa stopped walking and looked at her. His gaze flitted over her body, taking in her figure, the darkness of her skin, her flowing ebony hair, and her deep black eyes.

Kaede realized suddenly that her kimono hadn't closed correctly below her neck. Did Ishikawa notice the skin revealed there? The uneasiness in his eyes told her that he did. The line of his mouth hardened, but he did not turn away. Kaede calmed her mind; not allowing herself to blush. She reached up and gently adjusted the robe.

"You don't talk about your father much since he lost his name," Ishikawa said uncomfortably.

Kaede sighed. "That is why his name was taken from him—so he would be harder to think, and speak, of." She indicated with her hand that they should resume walking.

"Do you have such dreams often?" he asked, pointedly looking away from her and concentrating on their surroundings. Huge oak pillars supported the ceilings high overhead. Hardwood floors whispered quietly beneath their feet.

"Not often," she said quietly. "Only twice before. The first time was two years ago during the purge—before Kachiko convinced her celestial husband to stop slaying her former clansmen."

"Bad advice," Ishikawa said, frowning. "They should have wiped the Scorpion from the face of Rokugan. Liars and murderers, every one of them. I understand, though, why the emperor listened to her. It's hard to refuse Kachiko anything."

"Yes," Kaede said, glancing at him, "I'm sure it is. The second time I had the dream was last summer, before that terrible plague outbreak in Shiro no Yojin. And now, again."

"What do you make of it?" Ishikawa asked.

Kaede put the fingers of her left hand to her lips and traced the contours of her mouth in thought. "I'm not sure," she finally said. "The portents are difficult to read. It feels as though someone has trod on the soul of the empire."

"Who could do that?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, shaking her head.

Ishikawa grunted. "I know you're sensitive to such things," he said, "but sometimes a dream is just a dream."

"I pray to the Fortunes you are right," she replied.

They were passing very near to the imperial wing now. The guards grew more frequent, though none challenged them. It would have been impolite to observe a high-ranking man and maiden out for a late walk.

As they passed a deserted stretch of corridor, Kaede noticed someone moving across the hallway and into a secret panel. The clarity of the Void was still with her, and she recognized Kachiko, the young emperor's wife. The empress moved like a cat, quickly and quietly. Almost before Kaede could register her presence, she was gone.

"Now where do you suppose she's going at this time of night?" Kaede asked thoughtfully.

"Who?" Ishikawa replied.

"The empress."

Ishikawa peered intently down the long dark corridor.

"I don't see her," he said. "I can hardly see my hand in front of my face. You're sure it was her?"

"Positive."

"You have the eyes of an owl," Ishikawa said admiringly.

Kaede nodded, fighting down a blush. "Sometimes."

"Did Kachiko see you?" he asked.

"I doubt it," she replied. "Whatever else her powers may be, Kachiko doesn't have Void-enhanced sight."

"A good thing, too," Ishikawa said. "She probably wouldn't be pleased to have us witnessing her assignments—whatever they may be. I doubt she's gone to collect moonbeams to remedy the emperor's illness."

"I doubt it, too," Kaede said. Her dark eyes flashed with inspiration.

"What is it?" Ishikawa asked, a trace of worry drawing his brows together.

"For months I've wanted to visit the emperor in private," Kaede said, "to see if I could cure him. Kachiko always cuts me off, though."

"She's very protective of the boy," Ishikawa said.

"Perhaps *too* protective," Kaede said.

"You think she has something to do with his infirmity?" Ishikawa asked.

Kaede shook her head. "I have no evidence to suspect anything. But what harm could it do for me to see the emperor?"

Ishikawa shrugged. "None, I'd say."

"Let's visit him now, then."

"In the middle of the night?"

Kaede gazed at him with her liquid eyes. "When will we have the chance again?"

Ishikawa nodded and grumbled, "Never, likely. Kachiko is too careful. Too sly."

"What else would you expect from the Mother of Scorpions?" "A sting in the back," Ishikawa replied. "Come on," he said,

indicating a nearby corridor with a nod of his head. "This way is quickest."

A short time later they came within sight of the Imperial Chambers. Heavily armed guards stood near the doors, brandishing yari spears.

"If we were Kachiko," Ishikawa whispered, "we'd know a secret way in and out."

"But we're not," Kaede whispered back. "Thank the Fortunes."

Ishikawa walked boldly toward the guards. They barred the entryway to the imperial chambers. "Konbanwa," he said. "Good evening."

"Konbanwa, Ishikawa-sama," they said, bowing low. They bowed to Kaede as well. To do less would have besmirched her honor, an offense punishable by execution.

"How's the emperor this evening?" Ishikawa asked. "Is he well?"

One of the four guards nodded. Another said, "So his most esteemed wife tells us."

Ishikawa paused as if listening to something in the distance. "Mistress Kaede and I thought we heard coughing. Bad coughing. She has healing skill that can help."

"We didn't hear anything," one guard said.

"Are you sure?" Ishikawa asked. "Lady Kaede's ears are very sharp."

"The Lady Kachiko is with him," another said.

"Surely she would welcome my help," Kaede said.

The guards shifted restlessly. "The empress left orders that she is not to be disturbed," one said.

"We don't want to disturb her, either," Ishikawa said. "We just want to ease the emperor's suffering. I assumed you would as well."

The lead samurai scratched his shoulder nervously. "We're all concerned, Ishikawa-sama," he said.

"As well you should be. After all, your lives depend on it," the Seppun captain said with a smile.

The guards smiled weakly at him and nodded.

Ishikawa turned to Kaede. "Come on," he said, making as if to leave. "I'm sure these guards know their business better than we do. It's impossible that the emperor could be in any danger with such fine samurai watching over him."

One of the men stepped forward. "If you want to check on the emperor, Ishikawa-sama..."

"We would feel better...." added another.

"And if you do not disturb the empress, how could she object?" said a third.

Ishikawa turned back to the guards and bowed slightly. The guards bowed lower. They parted to allow Ishikawa and Kaede to pass. Ishikawa let Kaede go first. He handed his

katana to the guards as he went, leaving his smaller sword, the wakizashi, tucked in his belt.

The two of them walked down the short corridor leading to the emperor's chambers. In the past, the Hantei emperors had often moved their quarters about within the castle. That way, they could catch the best views, or the best light. The emperor would reside in the coolest rooms in the summer and the warmest in winter.

Since he had taken ill, though, Hantei the 39th had stayed within this one room. The room lay buried deep within the castle and had no windows. Only this one corridor allowed access—though, obviously, Kachiko knew of a secret way out. The way stood open, its fiisuma panel slid back to admit some air. Coming within ten paces of the room, Ishikawa and Kaede both understood why.

The air was stale and sour. Sickly sweet incense burned to mask the smell, but only made the air more cloying. Kaede put her sleeve over her mouth and nose.

As the two approached, violent coughing echoed from the room. Cautiously, Kaede and Ishikawa stepped to the threshold.

The room was dimly lit. Only two red paper lanterns scattered their wan light about the chamber. Imperial tatami mats, thick and lush, covered the wooden floor. Draped silks hung from many of the rafters, creating a gossamer curtain around the room's perimeter.

A marvelous painting of Fudotaki, the capital city's great waterfall, covered the north wall of the room. Below it lay the emperor's bed, a thick futon and quilt, surrounded by smoldering incense burners.

The young emperor lay on the bed, his face turned to the ceiling. His beautiful silk covers lay scattered on the dark wooden floor. He wore a dark kimono, cut short for sleeping. Not yet past his twentieth birthday, Hantei looked aged beyond his years. His face was wan, his cheeks sunken. Dark rings surrounded his eyes. Sweat drenched his pale body.

Ishikawa and Kaede bowed low when they entered the room. "Majesty," Ishikawa said. The two of them paused, embarrassed by the intimacy of the situation.

The young emperor didn't reply. Another coughing fit wracked his thin frame.

Sympathy welled up within Kaede's breast as she gazed at him. She stepped toward the gossamer curtains surrounding the bed and drew them back. "I've come to help," she said quietly. She moved to the emperor's side and laid her right palm on his forehead.

A spark flew from the emperor's head to her hand as she touched him. Kaede almost drew back, but steeled herself and placed her palm on his sweaty brow. She cleared her mind and concentrated. The healing magic of the Void flowed from her body to his.

Hantei's neck twisted, and his eyes slitted open.

"Kachiko?" the boy emperor asked sleepily. "Is that you?"

"No," Kaede replied gently. "It's Isawa Kaede."

"Why are you here?" he asked, his voice hoarse and weak.

"Ishikawa and I heard your coughing," she said. "We came to help you." She felt something within him resisting her

restorative magic.

"I need no help," the emperor said, almost angrily. "Where is my wife?"

"We do not know, your Majesty," Kaede said. Something in the boy's eyes made her shudder. She withdrew her hand from his head.

"Go, then," the boy whispered. "Do not return unless I summon you."

Ishikawa and Kaede bowed low. They turned and left quickly, pausing only long enough to reassure the guards and reclaim Ishikawa's sword.

Kaede shook her head. "This sickness upon him is beyond my healing," she said. "Perhaps, with more study, I could try again. Knowledge cures all evil."

"Perhaps," Ishikawa said. "I could use some fresh air. How about you?"

Kaede nodded her agreement.

They turned toward the gardens. Neither of them spoke as they trudged silently through the dark corridors.

As they passed a side hallway, Kaede suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" Ishikawa asked.

"For a moment, I thought I saw my father," she said.

"Where?"

"At the end of that hall."

Ishikawa peered into the gloom. "Well, if Ujina was in the corridor," he said, "he's not there now. Probably it was just a shadow, and the memory of your dream."

"He's not Ujina any longer," Kaede said.

"I know," Ishikawa replied. "My tongue is clumsy. I'm sorry."

She nodded.

They resumed walking. Soon the two of them stood on one of the castle's many sheltered verandas, looking out over the night-dark greenery. A summer breeze rustled through the garden, making the trees shake and the flowers dance. A few white rose petals wafted by, like kites on a blustery day.

The wind was chilly for the season, and Kaede wrapped her kimono tighter around her body. For a time, neither she nor Ishikawa spoke. They just stood close together, inhaling the night breeze.

Finally, Kaede said, "Did you see his eyes?"

Ishikawa shook his head. "The emperor's? No. Why? What did you see?"

"For a moment," she said, "when he looked at us, I would swear I saw fire inside his eyes."

"A trick of the light," Ishikawa replied. "It's those damn red lanterns that Kachiko favors. They make everything look eerie."

Kaede nodded. "Perhaps."

Ishikawa looked at her longingly. He opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it again. His face grew stern.

She wondered what he had been about to say. She knew what she *hoped* he would say—but such words had never passed between them. Perhaps they never would.

A sudden flapping sound disturbed the breeze. Ishikawa drew his katana to defend the Void Mistress.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"A bat maybe," he said, "or an owl. Stay back." But as the words left his lips, they both saw what it was—a small bird winging its way through the darkness.

"That's strange," said Ishikawa.

Kaede shook her head. "It's a message from my people." The Mistress of the Void extended her hand, and the bird came down and perched on her outstretched finger.

Ishikawa had never seen a bird like it before. It was small, about the size of a dove, but its plumage was brilliant orange, red, and gold. It had a soft tuft of yellow feathers on top of its head and a downy orange frill around its neck. Its eyes and talons sparkled like pure gold. It made a small trilling sound as Kaede gazed at it.

A thin golden cord bound a small scroll to the bird's right leg. Kaede took the note, unrolled it, and read. She frowned.

Then she sighed and said, "I've been summoned to the Elemental Council."

Ishikawa nodded. "I'll tell your servants to pack for the trip."

SUMMONINGS

^sawa Uona leaned her left hand on a rock and looked up. The wind whipped around her, blowing her black hair into her face and making the red and yellow birds on her white kimono flap their tiny silken wings.

The mountain towered over her, not so tall now as it had been a short while ago. The summit remained just a brief climb away. Uona smiled; she loved the mountains almost as much as she loved the wind.

Where else on Rokugan could one stand and touch the clouds? Where could one be closer to the wind and air? Where could one escape the everyday duties of court life, the intrigues, the romances, the boredom? Some in the Phoenix preferred the great libraries, but Uona preferred a secluded mountaintop.

The wind found the crevasses in her kimono, but she didn't mind. The cold invigorated her skin rather than chilling it. She drew a deep breath in through her nose and exhaled it in a slow whistle through her mouth.

Probing the mountain face with her fingers, she found a handhold and pulled herself up once, twice, three times. As she topped the ridge, the mountainside flattened out. After a difficult climb, the summit was only a pleasant walk from this point on. Uona smiled.

Small scrub pines, like bonsai trees, dotted the rocky pathway. Uona strode confidently to the peak. She gazed up at the sun goddess, Amaterasu, and raised her hands in supplication. The breeze tugged at Uona's kimono, kissing

her pale flesh, begging her to run with it. She turned circles on the balls of her feet and reveled in the sun and wind.

Uona gazed from her mountaintop over the majestic countryside below. Around her lay the Great Wall of the North—Kyodai na Kabe sano Kita—one of the chief mountain ranges of Roku-gan. Away to the south stretched the sacred wood, Mori Isawa, and beyond that, the fertile lands of her kinsmen.

Past the borders, she knew, lay chaos. The Emerald Empire had been in upheaval since the death of Hantei the 38th. His son was no replacement for the wise old ruler. Even now, clan fought clan and plague ravaged the land. Not here, though. Here only the breeze touched her, only the clouds could find her.

The wind whispered its secrets in Uona's ears. It pushed gently, insistently at her back. It caressed her like a lover through the folds of her robe. With a smile on her face, Isawa Uona threw herself off the precipice and into the open air.

She fell, thrilled at the wind rushing against her body. The tiny silk birds on her kimono fluttered and flapped. Her hair trailed behind her, a dark comet in the afternoon sky. Her pale brown eyes drank in the earth far below as it rushed up to meet her. Uona laughed—a musical, joyful sound.

The wind laughed with her, touched her, lifted her up. Soon she was no longer falling. The wind embraced Isawa Uona, Mistress of the Air, and carried her up, past the mountaintops and into the sky.

She danced among the cloud tops, gathering their cold wetness into her hands and lathering her lovely face with it.

She washed her hair in a thunderhead, and where she wrung it out, rain fell.

Sadly, she knew this moment could not last forever. As she lounged in the clouds, Uona saw something approaching. The thing glittered in the sunlight. She soon realized what it was.

The small bird fluttered to Uona's side and looked into the Air Mistress' pale brown eyes. She gazed back at the bird and took the small scroll from its talon. Upon reading the missive, she let herself fall out of the clouds and back toward ground once more—back toward the problems of the Emerald Empire.

XXXXXXXXXX

The man on the road looked like a hermit or a wandering monk. His head was shaved, and he wore a simple blue cloak over his kimono. The kimono's silk had lost its luster, and its decorations were faded with years of wear. Patterns of fish and sea plants covered the fabric. Simple straw sandals adorned the man's feet, and he held a paper parasol over his head to ward off the afternoon sun.

He came to a wooden bridge over a small river and paused to watch some peasants fish. Children played on the banks of the river below the bridge, laughing and running. The river seemed to share the children's joy. One of the fishermen looked at the man and smiled.

"What brings you out today, Brother?" the peasant asked, thinking the man was an itinerant monk.

"The sun, the sky, the trees, the water," the man answered, smiling.

The peasant, a broad-shouldered farmer in rough clothes, extended his fishing pole toward the man. "Care to try? I'm not having much luck today," the farmer said. "Maybe a priest will have better fortune."

The man folded his parasol and leaned against the bridge's wooden railing. "No thank you," he said pleasantly. "Besides, I'm not a priest, just a traveler. I'm sure your luck will improve." He hummed a lilting tune.

The farmer humphed good-naturedly and cast his line once more.

The wanderer watched the line fall into the water. He gazed at the ripples the hook made as it hit. He changed his tune slightly. As he did, a fish jumped, and then another.

The farmer scratched his head. "Well, what do you know?" he said. "Looks like there are fish in this river after all. I was beginning to wonder."

"Better hold onto your pole," the man told him. As he said it, the line went taut, nearly yanking the bamboo rod out of the farmer's hand.

The farmer laughed. "Looks like you may be my lucky charm!"

The man shook his head and picked up his parasol once more. "No," he said. "Your luck was bound to turn. I'm just glad to have been here to see it." He opened the parasol and finished crossing the bridge. The fisherman landed his catch and waved to the stranger.

Isawa Tomo, the Phoenix Master of Water, waved back. The peasant never suspected the true identity of his lord.

Tomo wandered down to the banks of the stream. The children rushed up to him, calling his name. The fisherman may not have recognized him, but the youngsters did. Tomo often passed this way. The children didn't think it odd that an Elemental Master should play with them, and their parents never believed them. Tomo played ball with his friends for a while before walking upstream once more.

He stopped for lunch on some rocks next to the rapids. Hidden stones churned the water white, like the manes of fine horses. Tomo ate his natto, sweet bean paste, and then made the leaf wrapper into a boat. He set the boat in the river and watched it navigate the eddies and whirlpools around the rocks.

As the boat disappeared around the bend, Tomo stood and left the riverside to walk through the forest. Late afternoon shadows danced amid the birches and pines. The fresh smell of the woods caressed Tomo's nose, and he drank the scent in gratefully. Overhead, birds sang sweetly.

A sudden quiet came to the forest. Tomo stopped and looked around. Was that a cloaked figure beneath the trees? Perhaps the Hooded Ronin? Tomo had heard he was in the area. No, it was just a trick of light and shadow. The birds resumed their song; Tomo resumed his walk.

His path emerged from the woods a short distance upstream. Normally, a small bridge—a few boards on a bracing frame—crossed the river at this point, but summer rains had washed down one of the supports. The bridge was missing.

An old woman stood at the end of the path, gazing at the river. Sunlight glinted off her wizened face. Tomo realized she was crying.

Walking forward, he asked, "What's the matter, Grandmother?"

The woman lifted her tearstained face to the Master of Water and tried to force a smile. "I... I was going to visit my daughter-in-law," she said. "It's the anniversary of my son's death, and I wanted to be with her and the children. I even wore my best kimono." She held out her arms to display the garment.

Tomo looked at it. It was red and white with delicate floral patterns. The kimono had been well cared for, but was starting to fray around the edges. Obviously it held great sentimental value for the woman.

"You see why I can't cross the river in this," she said. Tomo nodded. Clearly she didn't recognize him any more than the fisherman had.

The old woman continued, "By the time I walk downstream to the bridge and then back to my daughter-in-law's house, it will be dark. I'll have missed the ceremonies." Tears formed in her eyes again.

"I can solve your problem, Grandmother," Tomo said.

"How?" she asked, wiping away the tears.

"I'll carry you across the river."

She looked at him appraisingly. "I hope you won't take offense," she said, "but you hardly look strong enough. There's not much meat on your bones, young man."

"I'm stronger than I look," he said.

The old woman looked at him skeptically and sighed. "Well," she said, "Shinsei teaches us never to judge by appearances. So if you want to help, I'll let you try. Please try not to ruin my kimono."

"I won't let a drop of water touch it," Tomo said, smiling at her. "Climb on my back."

He set aside his parasol and knelt down to give the old woman a ride. She climbed onto his back and hooked her legs under his arms. "Not too heavy, am I?" she asked.

"As light as a feather," he replied. He carried her toward the edge of the river, and then stopped.

"What's wrong, young man?" the old woman asked.

"Just seeking the best route, Grandmother." He stepped in. The waters parted slightly in front of him, and he found a firm stone to set his foot on, then another, and another.

"That's funny," the old woman said from his back, "I didn't see these stepping stones from the riverbank."

"Tears had clouded your eyes," Tomo said. "Don't worry, now, we'll soon reach the other side." Another dozen steps and the Master of Water's promise came true. He set the old woman down. "See? Not even a drop on your kimono."

The old woman adjusted the fabric, looked up at him, and smiled. "Why, you're right. Thank you, young man. Domo ari-gato gozaimasu. What is your name? You must stop for tea sometime."

"Tomo," he said humbly.

"Why, the same name as one of our lords," she said, rubbing her stubbly chin.

"The very same."

She nodded. "That must be a good omen for you—though I daresay you might want to change your name before the lord finds out. I hear some of them can be very jealous."

"I doubt he'll mind," said Tomo.

"Well, you know your own business best," the old woman said. She waved good-bye and shambled down the path.

Tomo smiled. After she had gone, he skipped quickly back across the surface of the river. His feet touched neither the river bottom nor the stones he'd found earlier.

He fetched his parasol and was about to open it again when a small bird fluttered down and landed on the paper umbrella.

"Hello," Tomo said to the bird.

The red and orange animal looked at him and tweeted a

happy reply. Attached to its golden leg was a small scroll. Tomo frowned, unfastened the scroll, and read it.

XXXXXXXXXX

Hot, clinging darkness surrounded the Phoenix Master of Fire. The air was dry and suffused with the odors of sulfur and incense, steel and leather. The noise of hammers echoed through the underground chambers. The rhythmic *whoosh* of huge bellows sounded like a slumbering dragon.

Isawa Tsuke leaned over an ancient scroll, peering closely at the kanji to unlock the silk's secrets. Occasionally, he would raise his head and make some notes on a nearby wooden tablet. The tablet burned where Tsuke touched his finger to it, the characters sparking to mystical life as he wrote on its surface.

The Master of Fire stood and stretched. The pointed shoulders of his orange robes ruffled. Crystal jewelry rattled with each movement of his iron muscles. He licked thin lips and ran one powerful hand over his shaved head. He yawned.

Tsuke took the candle from the table and walked to the other end of the great room. The chamber lay deep beneath Shiro Asako, the Castle of the White Phoenix, and Tsuke could almost feel the weight of the rocks above pressing down on him. He didn't mind.

Discipline required sacrifice, and Tsuke would go to any lengths for his art. He set his candle down near the room's exit and went into the adjoining chamber—the forge.

The room glowed with orange light from great fires. Hiromi, a Shiba steel master, stopped hammering and looked up as Tsuke entered the room. She was a short, well-muscled woman with a serious face. Her brown hair had been cropped close to her scalp for her work; long hair had a tendency to catch fire.

"Are you ready for me yet?" Tsuke asked her.

The steel master put down her hammer and tongs and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her leather glove. "Not yet, Tsuke-sama. The steel is uncooperative today."

Tsuke grunted his disapproval. He walked to a corner of the room and picked up a half-finished sword. The metal was still hot, but the temperature didn't bother the Master of Fire.

"I'm a busy man," he said, not looking at Hiromi as he spoke.

She bowed. "I know, my lord."

"See that you take no more of my time than is necessary."

She bowed again. "I will not, Tsuke-sama."

He set the sword down and returned to his chamber. He retrieved the candle from the entryway and walked to the other side of the room. There, he placed the candle amid a collection of weapons—swords, scythes, war hammers, iron staves, sai. He picked up a tetsubo, an iron-studded staff, and swung it through the air.

The air sang, and the staff's metal hummed with the energy of the magical fire that forged it. Tsuke executed a few kata, practice swings with the tetsubo, before pausing to study it once more. He ran his finger over the point of one stud and was surprised when it scratched him.

Putting the finger to his mouth, he sucked away the blood. Then he smiled. Fine weapons were being made here. True, many of his clan mates did not see the value of weapons. They were steeped in the ways of pacifism. But what good was strength if it was never used? Why should Phoenix stand idly by while the empire fell into further decay? Yes, the clan had sent the Crane help to defend against invasion. It was hardly enough, though. Shiba Tsukune, for all her martial skills, was merely one woman. And the force they'd sent with her was pathetically small, even if it did boast some fine shugenja.

The Master of Fire wondered if his peers would send a larger force once the Crane had fallen to their Shadowlands enemies. He growled discontentedly to himself and set the tetsubo down. As he did so, he knocked over his candle. It fell to the floor and sputtered out.

Tsuke cursed.

He concentrated, and the tip of his right index finger caught fire. He quickly found the candle and set his finger to it, relighting the wick. Turning, he walked back to his worktable.

Sitting on the table was a small golden bird. Its feathers flashed orange and red in the candlelight. The bird chirped a greeting. Tsuke's eyes narrowed as he spotted the tiny scroll attached to its leg.

The Master of Fire set the candle down, took the bird in hand, untied the scroll, and set the bird down once more. He opened the scroll and read.

The bird hopped about Tsuke's table, cocking its head and looking at the Master of Fire's tools and scrolls. It sang happily.

Tsuke looked at it, his eyes glowing orange in the dim light. "Well?" he asked impatiently. "What are you waiting for? You've delivered your message, and I've read it."

The bird chirped and bowed its small head. Then it stood proudly erect and burst into flames.

When nothing remained of it but ashes, the Master of Fire smiled.

BATTLEFRONTS

*mnBmw^m*Mmm*mmmmmmmmi!ntmwmmwmmm*wmrn
umm*

C

L, J hiba Tsukune struggled from the mud where her horse lay dying. She pushed the beast's carcass off her right leg and scrambled out from under it. The leg twinged with pain as she stood.

The horseman she had been fighting wheeled and came at her again out of the smoke. Tsukune pushed the pain from her mind and raised her sword. She held it high and straight, parallel to her right ear. She felt blood trickling from that ear, staining her long black hair. Her mud-soaked shirt clung to her arms, its yellow fabric stiffening. A lock of sweaty hair fell over her thin, tanned face, tickling her eyelashes. She ignored it and concentrated on her charging foe.

The man riding toward her was a ronin— alive and human, unlike many of his companions in Doji Hoturi's army. His face was brutish and unshaven; his smile showed missing teeth; his eyes held murder. He aimed his long spear at Tsukune's heart.

At the last instant, Tsukune stepped aside, avoiding his blow. The ronin swept the long spear up to parry her counterattack, but Tsukune wasn't aiming at him. Instead, her katana cut deep into the right shoulder of the ronin's horse. The blade traced a long gash down the animal's ribs. She slashed up and freed the blade as it met the horse's haunches.

Gore splashed into the air, and the horse went down. The ronin threw himself free as it fell, but he landed on his back. Before he could get up, Tsukune ran to his side and thrust her sword through his chest. The wound made a hissing sound, and greenish slime oozed out. Khaki blood leaked from the ronin's lips as he died. He muttered a curse.

The Phoenix warrior maid suppressed a shudder. The ronin had not been human after all. Why had Hoturi given up his birthright to captain this army of the damned? Hadn't they long been friends and even occasional lovers? Hadn't she saved Hoturi's life once? Hadn't she fought beside him at Kyuden Kakita? How could the man she knew abandon his honor—his duty? War forced sad choices, like killing a noble horse to defeat its ronin master, but what could have caused Doji Hoturi to make this terrible pact?

Tsukune's reverie lasted only a moment. Battle cries quickly snapped her back to reality. Her forces were in full retreat. Hoturi's undead army had chased her troops south toward the Kabe ue no ho ni sa Umi, the Mountains above the Ocean.

Her people hadn't meant to bring the war into this small village, but Hoturi's creatures had dogged them mercilessly, forced them into the settlement, and set the town aflame. Mud from the previous night's rain slowed the Phoenix's retreat and turned the village into a slaughterhouse. The fighting had separated Tsukune from her elite shugenja unit.

The wind shifted suddenly, and Tsukune found herself engulfed in white smoke. White, the color of death. She heard fighting all around but could no longer see anything. Tsukune coughed, and her eyes began to tear.

Her people were moving away from her position. Perhaps they were even out of the village by now. Stumbling through the smoke, Tsukune tripped over a body: Shiba Miyaki, a young woman she had trained. Miyaki's face had been crushed into the ground by a horse's hoof. Tsukune caught herself before she fell and leaned heavily against a nearby hut.

Her heart pounded in her ears. Her blood-caked hair matted against her face. Life ran slowly in front of her. She saw figures moving through the smoke in the distance, inhuman figures. They looked as though they were dancing between the burning houses. Time often stretched on a battlefield. Sometimes, this aided a samurai—gave her more time to counter an enemy's moves. Other times, though, it made battle a never-ending hell.

This was one of those hellish times.

Above the din of combat, a sound caught her attention. Crying. The crying of a child.

The noise solidified Tsukune's grip on reality. Time moved normally once more. She knew her duty was to escape this battle, to return to her unit and live to fight the enemy another day. She had no time to rescue peasant children. Yet the cry haunted her ears. She could not ignore it.

The sound came from a burning hut only a short distance away. Tsukune dashed across the intervening space. An undead samurai appeared out of the white smoke to oppose her. She swung to cut it in half at the waist. Her sword stuck near the creature's spine. The monster turned to claw her. She grunted and pushed the blade through. The samurai fell in two pieces, spraying black blood. Tsukune kept running.

The bodies of a man and a woman lay before the ratty stick-and-thatch structure. Tsukune stepped over them. The wooden door to the hut was jammed shut, so Tsukune kicked it open. As she did, black smoke billowed forth—burning her eyes. She threw the sleeve of her yellow shirt across her face and charged into the burning home.

The smoke made it impossible to see, so she let her ears guide her. The hut contained two small rooms, which the fire had turned into a tiny inferno. Tsukune cursed silently and hoped her garments and hair wouldn't catch fire. It would be stupid to burn to death on this fool's errand. "Tell me where you are!" she called through the smoke. "I want to help!"

The child didn't reply; he only kept crying.

Shiba Tsukune groped with her hands in the hot, smoke-filled darkness. Twice she burned her fingers on blazing wooden walls, hidden in the gloom. Finally, her fingers found the hair of a child.

"It's all right," Tsukune gasped through the smoke. "I'll get you out. Are there any other people in here?"

"N-no," came the small reply. The child coughed.

Reaching down Tsukune seized him under the arms. She knew she couldn't find the door again in the smoke. Fortunately, the home's walls weren't very sturdy. Nearby, a small ray of light peeked through. Carrying the child, Tsukune ran as hard as she could toward the light.

She hit the wall with her shoulder. Something splintered. Pain shot through Tsukune's body, but the wall didn't break. She charged it again. This time it gave way with a resounding crunch. Tsukune and her small package fell

headlong into a broad mud puddle. The landing knocked the breath from the samurai-ko and covered her with mud once more.

Tsukune and the child lay there for a moment, coughing and gasping for breath. Amaterasu protected fools and small children, Tsukune remembered.

A nearby footfall brought Tsukune to her senses. She pushed up on her knees and saw a dead man walking toward her. Behind him came a dead woman. They were the two people who had lain in the door of the burning hut.

Tsukune rose. "Stay behind me," she said to the child.

The tot gasped, "Mama! Papa!"

"Stay back," Tsukune whispered harshly. "They're not your parents anymore." Despite the warning, the boy tried to push past. The samurai-ko stepped to the left, interposing her body between the child and the undead.

The creatures shambled forward. Their recent resurrection made them slow and awkward. Seizing the child's hand, Tsukune turned to flee. Her samurai nature rebelled at the thought of running from the fight, but dying at the hands of the undead would help no one.

Three more undead shambled out of the smoke to block her retreat. These three weren't clumsy zombies, like the child's parents. They were undead samurai, clad in armor and brandishing swords. Their eyes blazed with green hellfire. Boils covered their livid flesh.

Spotting Tsukune, the creatures howled a hideous war cry and charged.

Tsukune turned back to the undead parents. They had reached the quagmire and shambled in. The child, crying, clung to the waistband of Tsukune's red silk pants.

Tsukune jumped to the edge of the mud, dragging the child with her. The boy let go of Tsukune's belt and fell facedown in the mud. Tsukune didn't have time to tend to him. Besides, with his face in the mud, the boy wouldn't see her slaughter his undead parents.

The samurai-ko's katana flashed and split the undead woman from collar to hip. The pieces fell to the ground but kept twitching.

The dead man tried to grab Tsukune's arm, but she whirled and elbowed him in the face. His nose broke, and his skull caved in, but still he clawed at her.

The other undead slogged through the wide puddle. Using her free hand, Tsukune grabbed the dead man's shirt and used a hip-throw to toss him in front of the advancing samurai. The undead father tripped his fellows. All four of them went down, thrashing.

Tsukune grabbed the boy and pulled him out of the mud. He bawled, tears washing the dirt from his eyes. The drying mud on her clothes slowed Tsukune's movements. She cursed silently and dashed into an alley between two burning huts.

Between the flaming buildings, an undead horseman reared up. Tsukune saw his blazing green eyes, the rotting flesh on his face, the obscene leer on his mouth. He held a barbed spear in one arm and the reins of his steed in the other. The bottom half of the horse's face was missing, and two white

ribs poked through where the animal's black skin had ripped away.

The child screamed as the horseman charged. The undead rider aimed its spear at the boy's chest. Tsukune stepped between them. She whipped her sword around, trying to ward off the creature's spear—but her blow wasn't strong enough.

The tip of the spear raked across her breastplate, and caught between the rolls of metal. The impact yanked Tsukune off her feet, and she fell. The spear came loose, and the horseman rode on. Tsukune hit hard and nearly rolled into one of the burning buildings. The child fell to his knees as the undead rider wheeled his steed for another pass.

"Run, boy," Tsukune called, "run!" But the child didn't listen.

Blood pounded in Tsukune's ears as she scrambled to her feet. The undead advanced on her, three samurai, the child's father, and the horseman. The heat of the building next to her singed Tsukune's flesh; the monster's cold gaze froze her soul.

She wheeled and slashed her blade into the burning house. Her gambit worked. The structure, weakened by the blaze, tumbled down between her and the undead. The child's father caught fire. He flailed his dead arms wildly as he burned.

Tsukune grabbed the child by the collar and ran. Her chest ached from where spear point had struck her armor. Her back throbbed from where she'd landed. Her lungs burned with smoke. The child cried.

My army is gone by now, Tsukune thought, either perished or fled. No sense calling for them and alerting the enemy to my position. She cursed herself for having gotten into this fix.

She dodged between burning houses without any clear idea of where she was going. The child staggered along with her, tripping with nearly every step, slowing her down, but Tsukune refused to give him up.

A burning building toppled in front of them, nearly crushing them both under its heavy timbers. Once it had been the village chief's house. Now it was a flaming rampart, cutting off Tsukune's retreat.

Tsukune whirled, seeking an alternate way out. All she saw was fire and death, and shadows moving through the smoke. Damn you, Doji Hoturi! she thought. If we meet again I won't pillow with you. I'll *kill* you.

Out of the smoke appeared the horseman and his four comrades. The boy's father had been burned beyond recognition— almost beyond semblance of humanity. His burnt flesh cracked and flaked off as he shambled forward.

Tsukune turned and pulled the child toward the one remaining space between two flaming buildings. The alley was narrow, but if she pushed the child in before her and defended their backs—

Another undead samurai appeared on the far side of the space, a long pike barring their escape.

"Nooo essscape for you, Phoeniksssss," hissed the horseman. He lowered his spear to charge.

"Stay behind me," Tsukune said to the boy. The child cowered behind her back, clutching at the samurai-ko's mud-caked pants. "And don't grab hold of me," Tsukune said sharply, "or you'll get us both killed." The boy let go and stood shaking and bawling.

Tsukune steeled her jaw as the horseman rode toward them. If she dodged the blow, the child would certainly die. She said a final prayer to her ancestors. Then an idea came to her.

As the horseman rode in, Tsukune stepped up to meet him, her sword held low. He thrust at her chest. At the last instant, she stepped aside, and the point of the spear lunged between her right arm and her ribs, into empty air.

Tsukune clamped down on the spear with her arm and grabbed the shaft with her left hand. She thrust herself backward with all her might, planting the spear point into the soft mud. Surprised, the undead horseman was yanked from his saddle and into the air.

He didn't have time to let go of the spear before Tsukune twisted and threw him into the inferno that had been the chief's house.

The rider screamed as he caught fire. Tsukune rose and thrust her katana into the undead horse's ribs, just behind its left foreleg. The horse bucked wildly as Tsukune yanked the sword free. The horseman staggered, burning, out of the fire. She wheeled and decapitated him with two messy chops. The horseman's body slumped heavily to the ground.

The other undead charged forward. Tsukune silently thanked the Fortunes for the fire that made the boy's father unrecognizable. Her first blow took the burned man's left

arm; her second cut him in midabdomen. Before his torso could fall, she separated his head from his body. He, too, returned to death.

However, slaying the father left Tsukune vulnerable to attacks from the undead samurai. Her armor turned aside one cut to her ribs, but a tetsubo landed a crushing blow on her arm.

Tsukune winced and nearly cried out. Her hand flinched open, and her katana fell to the mud. The third undead samurai thrust at her, but she turned aside its sword with the metal guard plate on the back of her left arm. She backed into the child and nearly fell down.

Pushing the boy away, she drew her wakizashi, the smaller of the daisho swords carried by every true samurai.

Tsukune glanced back at the narrow alley between the two houses. The pikeman still held it, his spear barring their retreat. Either they would die on that spear, or before the weapons of the undead—or under bony hooves of the dead steed. Its wound was not debilitating, and it advanced on her, its eye sockets blazing with toxic green energy. More figures appeared behind them— undead coming to reinforce their comrades.

Tsukune burned from fire and sweat. Her lungs ached with the effort of breathing. She tried to decide how best to die.

Something leapt over the flaming ruins of the mayor's house. The figure arced high in the air, twisted, and landed lightly on its feet behind the advancing undead.

"Ujimitsu!" Tsukune cried.

The undead whirled, but it was too late. Shiba Ujimitsu, the Phoenix Champion, cut the first one in half before he'd even finished turning. The creature fell to the ground in two pieces. Its legs scrambled, trying to raise its bony hips out of the mud. The flopping torso brandished its rusting katana—but Ujimitsu easily stepped out of reach.

The second monster parried Ujimitsu's first cut, but he counterthrust, shoving his sword up beneath the creature's chin. The point of Ujimitsu's katana came out the top of the undead samurai's skull.

As Tsukune rushed forward, Ujimitsu yanked hard on his sword, ripping the monster's head from its neck. Its body slumped heavily to the ground.

Tsukune thrust her wakizashi under the ribs of the final undead samurai—but the blade missed the thing's black heart.

The creature turned on her, swinging its tetsubo. Tsukune caught its arm with her left hand, preventing the blow from smashing her skull. The two foes struggled, locked in a deadly embrace.

The undead horse jumped forward and reared, intent on crushing both combatants under its hooves. Before its hooves could descend, Shiba Ujimitsu leapt on the monster's back. Swinging his katana in a wide arc, he lopped the horse's head from its neck. The steed's body tottered, balanced precariously on its hind legs. Then it fell to one side. Ujimitsu leapt lightly to the ground as the horse toppled into the burning ruins of the chief's house.

The Phoenix Champion turned to Tsukune. She was still wrestling her undead foe. "Stop fooling around, and let's

go," Ujimitsu called to her jovially.

Tsukune didn't see the joke. "The alley's blocked by a pikeman!" she shouted back. "Reinforcements are coming, and we've nowhere to run!"

"Oh, is that all," he said, a smile playing on his handsome face. He threw his arms wide, and his red and gold kimono billowed like the wings of a bird taking flight. His strong legs propelled him into the sky. He arced over the burning houses, past the alley, and landed behind the pikeman.

Tsukune snapped her face forward, smashing her forehead into the skull of her foe. The move splashed pieces of slimy skin on her cheeks, and one of the undead samurai's eyes popped out. The creature staggered. She yanked her wakizashi out of its ribs and lopped off the creature's head. Disgusted, she pushed the quivering body off her. It fell backward, flopping into a large mud puddle.

The drumming in Tsukune's ears receded into a dull roar. Only then did she hear the child screaming. The body that Ujimitsu had cut in half had crawled to where the boy stood. It clawed at the child with talonlike hands.

Tsukune rushed forward and thrust her wakizashi through the monster's chest, pinning it to the ground. She fetched her katana from where it lay in the mud and chopped off the creature's head.

Retrieving her wakizashi, Tsukune sheathed both swords, picked up the boy, and ran for the narrow alley. The buildings crumbled as they ran through, raining cinders and ash down on them. The boy's hair caught fire, but Tsukune patted it out with her hands.

When they exited the alley, they found Ujimitsu standing over the undead pikeman's body. "What took you so long?" he asked, smiling.

"Ujimitsu," Tsukune said, "I've never been so glad to see anyone in all my life."

"And you may never be so glad again, if we don't get out of here," he replied.

"I've lost my bearings," Tsukune said. "Which way?"

"Follow me," Ujimitsu replied, indicating a path through the inferno. "You'd better give me the child. You look exhausted."

Tsukune nodded. "Not too tired to run for my life, though," she said. She handed her precious burden over to the Phoenix Champion, and the two of them ran.

As they darted through the smoke, she said. "I heard you were in Shiba province three days ago. How is it possible that you're here now?"

Ujimitsu smiled and said, "Reports can be deceiving. I go where I'm needed."

"I fear," she said, "that you will soon be needed throughout all of Rokugan."

THE COUNCIL

Kyuden Isawa, the ancestral home of the Phoenix lords, thrust up out of the white sand like a castle from a child's dream. The fortress' towers overlooked the forests of Mori Isawa to the west, and the great ocean, Umi Amaterasu, to

the east. From the topmost windows, on a clear day, one could see even the distant Yama no Kuyami to the south—the mountains that separated the lands of the Phoenix from those of the emperor. Even the lowest windows gave spectacular views. Kyuden Isawa sat on a broad plain of sand, only a bow shot from the water. Earth, sea, and sky merged with the castle, creating a serene whole. If Otosan Uchi, the imperial capital, was like heaven, then surely this place was heaven's gate.

Within the castle, the Phoenix had spent a millennium perfecting their spellcraft. The keep's low, kanji-covered walls protected the Phoenix's home with the spells of forty generations of shugenja. Those powerful magics

kept their castle safer than any army could. The enchantments extended deep into the ground, below the building's foundations, and high into the sky. The wide beach and gracefully curving ocean gave the keep's inhabitants command of everything within sight. No one could approach the Isawa fortress unseen. Kyuden Isawa was proof against attack by air, sea, or earth.

The modest walls and powerful spells safeguarded something more precious to the Isawa than life itself—knowledge. Deep within the bowels of the castle lay the Great Library, repository of all the Phoenix's wisdom. Indisputably, the library held the greatest collection of magical scrolls in all of Rokugan.

Access to the library was restricted to the most learned Phoenix shugenja. The five Elemental Masters numbered among that elite group. Today did not find the elemental lords gathered deep within the castle's bowels, though. Rather, they assembled in the topmost tower of the ancient keep—in their most sacred council chamber.

The chamber was, in fact, a large, square, open-air garden measuring twenty-five paces to a side. An engawa, a roofed veranda, surrounded the perimeter of the garden. The engawa was just wide enough for three people to walk comfortably abreast. It was built of tawny wood, and strong beams supported its red-tiled roof. The outer wall of the garden was stone, plastered to exquisite white smoothness. The walkway circling the garden had a short wooden railing that ran around its inside perimeter.

Within the engawa, the garden lay open to the sky. Only the masters, their invited guests, and the garden's keepers were allowed into this sacred space. The magics of the Phoenix protected it against invaders.

At the entrance to the garden stood a wooden pillar on the right and a stone dragon on the left. Atop the pillar sat a single white lacquer bowl filled with ashes. The dragon held a broad white basin with a simple bamboo ladle. Water fountained from the dragon's mouth into the bowl and flowed out into a tiny waterfall. The waterfall cascaded past the dragon's breast and into a pool lined with white rock. Though no stream led from the pool, the water never overflowed.

A white sand path, Jinsei no Tabiji, the Road of Life's Passage, led between the dragon and the pillar and then circled the garden counterclockwise. Lush, green bamboo, carefully pruned to knee height, separated the path from the wooden veranda.

Just before doubling back on itself, the path turned toward the center of the garden. There it met an exquisite wooden bridge, arching toward the middle of the space. The bridge passed over a wide circular pond, ringing the garden's inner precinct like a moat. The water of the pond, Mezami no

Kawa, the River of Awakening, ran gently, and without any obvious source, in a never-ending circle. Lotus flowers sat placidly on the water's surface.

Beyond the water, the bridge passed through the great torii Chishiki no Tobira, the Gate of Knowledge, a wooden arch standing as high as two men. The gate's dark wood was decorated with inlays of ivory, gold, and red jade. The inlays depicted flames and birds chasing each other endlessly over the torii's surface.

Past the gate lay a circular isle covered in smooth, green grass. Five small wooden sitting platforms dotted the circumference. At the end of the bridge, to each side, stood two wooden pillars. Atop one rested five large black lacquer bowls, marked with the mon of the Phoenix.

On the other pillar rested a cylindrical iron bell, hanging from a wooden arch. The surface of the ancient bell had been cast with kanji, birds, and flames. At the base of the bell lay a small bamboo hammer.

Everything within the garden stood ready, waiting for the entrance of the Council of Five. Isawa Tadaka, who had summoned the council, would lead them today. He looked at the masters waiting by the rail.

Isawa Kaede, Mistress of the Void and Tadaka's half-sister, stood calmly, as placid as the lotus flowers upon the River of Awakening. Next to her stood Isawa Uona, Mistress of the Air. Unseen wind tugged at Uona's hair, making it fall in pleasing curves around her pretty face. Behind them stood Isawa Tomo and Isawa Tsuke. Tadaka's brother, the Master of Water, had a mischievous glint in his eye. Tsuke looked grim—as always. The

Master of Fire knitted his fingers together and moved his lips as if whispering silently. Even now, the Fire Lord catalogued and practiced pyrotechnic magic.

With a nod to his brethren, Tadaka stepped off the engawa and put his foot on the Road of Life's Passage. He stopped between the pillar and the dragon at the entryway.

"In fire from ashes we are born; in fire to ashes we return," Tadaka chanted after the ancient tradition. He took a handful of ashes from the bowl on his right and raised the fist containing them to his chest, just over his heart. The other Elemental Masters echoed his words and did the same.

Holding his fist tight, Tadaka walked the white sand path counterclockwise around the pool. The others followed—first Kaede, then Uona, Tsuke, and Tomo. At the foot of the wooden bridge, Tadaka stopped and bowed.

"We pass now from life to spirit," he said, placing his right foot upon the bridge and walking over it. The others stopped and did the same. Beneath the great torii, they paused and bowed once more.

"Out of the world and to this land we come," Tadaka intoned, "seeking wisdom and the guidance of our mother Amaterasu." He picked up the bamboo hammer with his left hand and struck the iron bell once.

A pure, clear tone filled the air. The hairs on the back of Tadaka's neck stood up. The air around the Elemental Masters shimmered, as if touched by fire. Tadaka bowed again and picked the first of the black lacquer bowls from its stand. He raised it to his breast with his left hand, just below the hand that held the ashes.

Stepping off the bridge, he walked to the platform on the far side of the grassy island. He crossed his legs, sat down, and watched as his brethren repeated the ancient ritual that he had just finished. They, too, seated themselves on the wooden platforms. Each faced toward the center of the space. Some days, a petitioner or guest might sit in the midst among them. Today's business was for the masters alone.

When all of them had been seated, Tadaka held up his bowl. He positioned his hand containing the ashes above the container. "I

come for earth," he said. "The power of stone speaks through me."

He opened his clenched hand, and a stream of rocks poured out into his bowl. When the stream stopped, he flexed his hand to show that it was empty and set the bowl down. He looked at Tsuke, seated to his left.

Tsuke raised the bowl and his hand in the same manner Tadaka had. "I come for fire," he said gravely. "I speak for the power of flame." He opened his fist, and fire poured into his bowl. It continued burning as he set the container on the grass before him. He turned to Uona, seated on his left.

She raised her bowl and hand. "I come for air," she said. "The power of the wind speaks with my voice." As she opened her fist, breezes shimmered between her hand and the bowl, and soft whispers filled the air. Though the others saw nothing in Uona's bowl, the noises continued as she set her bowl down.

Tomo raised his bowl and hand. "I come for water," he said, a smile creeping across his face. "The ocean's voice fills my

words." He opened his fist, and a stream of water poured forth, filling his bowl. He set the bowl down and turned to his half-sister, Kaede, seated on his left.

Isawa Kaede raised her fist and bowl as the other Elemental Masters had. "I speak for the void," she said. "My words echo the emptiness that is one." She unclenched her fist, and darkness poured out. The darkness seemed liquid, but it caught no light. Its surface showed neither shimmer nor ripple. When her bowl was filled, she set it down on the grass before her.

All the Elemental Masters leaned back and assumed the lotus position—their legs crossed, the backs of their hands resting upon their knees, their open palms turned upward. As one, they took a deep breath and exhaled it slowly. The air in the sacred garden tingled with arcane power. From high overhead, Amat-erasu shone her warm light on her children.

Tadaka spoke. "Our fears are confirmed," he said. "The Black Scrolls are being opened by Yogo Junzo."

The other members of the council nodded grimly. For a moment, no one spoke. Finally, Tsuke said, "We've all suspected this, feared it in our dreams, felt it in our bones. But how do you know? Can you be sure?"

"The Nameless One brought word to Ujimitsu, as the champion and I battled evil in Mori Isawa," Tadaka said.

"You saw our father?" Kaede asked.

Tadaka shook his head. "Not I. He appeared only to Ujimitsu."

"Do you trust our father's words?" Tomo asked.

"I do," Tadaka said. "Though he's lost his name, and though he's become mysterious of late, I see no reason he would lie about such a grave matter."

Tsuke frowned and looked around the walled garden. "The question, then," he said, "is this: Will we raise our eyes to heaven as this scourge runs like wildfire across our lands, or will we fight?"

"A samurai cannot fight an enemy he does not know," Uona replied. "Not effectively."

"Tadaka knows the enemy," Tomo said.

Tadaka shook his head and frowned behind his hood. "Though I've fought the Shadowlands long and hard, I've only touched the surface," he said. "And Junzo I hardly know at all."

"We need more knowledge," Tsuke said. "Three Black Scrolls are in our possession, taken from the Scorpion long ago and hidden away. We should retrieve them and bring them here for study."

"That path is dark indeed," Kaede said, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"Darker than falling to the minions of Fu Leng?" Tsuke asked, his eyes blazing. "We must abandon our pacifism. Now is the time to fight."

Kaede shook her head and lowered her eyes.

Tomo turned toward her and said, "Sister, I fear the Master of Fire is right. Perhaps we could sit here in our fortress, safe from the Evil One and his minions. What good would our peace be, though, if all else is swept away by an evil tide?"

"To study the scrolls might be enough," Uona said, her hair still dancing around her face. "Our divinations could give us the insights needed to turn back Fu Leng. The wards surrounding our Great Library would protect the scrolls. We need not open them; we need only examine them."

"Think of the price if we don't," Tsuke said. "Already the Crane have gone mad. Hoturi is killing his own people. Tsukune and our forces have done little to slow the Doji's shadow army. The knowledge we have now is *not enough*."

Kaede looked at Tadaka. "What say you, Brother?"

Tadaka took a deep breath before speaking. "The shadow is on our doorstep," he said. "I've fought the Evil One's minions in our sacred forest. Clearly our current strategy is not working. We must do more if the Phoenix Clan—if Rokugan—is to survive."

"But the Black Scrolls," Kaede said. "I feel them in my soul even now—and I fear their power."

"All of us do," said Tsuke. "That is only right. But it is also because we do not know them. And because of our ignorance, we do not know how to defeat them. We need knowledge to conquer the might of Junzo's Black Scrolls. The scrolls brought Fu Leng's downfall once. Surely with knowledge we can turn their power to that end once more."

"We are the masters of the elements," Uona said, "but also I hear their voices—the voices of the land itself. Those voices cry

out to me. The land suffers. We must act."

Kaede sighed. "Yes. We must act—soon." In her mind, she saw the infirm emperor, heard the rasp of his cough, saw the bleak fire in his eyes.

"Controlling the scrolls may not be enough," Tomo said. He looked around the circle, studying his brethren, wishing he could wash away their cares. "We need firsthand knowledge of the enemy, too—*current* knowledge of Junzo and his forces."

"Perhaps we could convince the Nameless One to be our eyes in the Shadowlands," Uona said. "He seems able to withstand lethal dangers."

"That might work," Tsuke said, "*if* we could find him."

"I fear he serves his own agenda more than ours," Kaede said. "I... I do not know that I trust him any longer."

Tomo and Tadaka nodded their agreement.

"One of our own number, then," Uona said. "One of us should journey to the Shadowlands and try to learn more about Junzo and the Evil One's plans. We could ferret out the knowledge we need, and perhaps strike a blow against the enemy as well."

"I'll go," said Tadaka.

Kaede looked at him. "Brother," she said, "you've already given so much, seen so much darkness and death, fought so many of the Evil One's minions ..."

"Surely those battles must blast your soul," Tomo said. "Let one of us go, Brother. You have done enough."

"No," Tadaka said. "It is because of those struggles that I am best suited to go. No one can truly know the Shadowlands, but I know them better than any of you. I've journeyed beyond the Carpenter's Wall many times. I've seen the darkness that the Kaiu Kabe protects Rokugan from. I understand Fu Leng's minions better than anyone, save perhaps the Crab who man the wall. I must be the one to go."

"Tadaka is right," Tsuke said. "He has fought the Shadowlands and its taint long and well. He should scout out Junzo if he can, discover the Evil One's weaknesses. It only makes sense."

The others sighed and looked uncomfortably around the circle. Finally, Tsuke spoke again. "While Tadaka is gone, three of us will gather the Black Scrolls in our possession—to see if we can plumb their secrets. We will bring them here for study, to a hidden chamber in the Great Library. We will ward the room so that anyone entering without our permission will die."

"Which three?" Tadaka asked. He looked from his siblings to Uona and Tsuke. Recovering the hidden scrolls might hold hidden dangers. Tadaka found himself wishing he could take on part of that burden as well.

"Where the scrolls are hidden will determine who is best suited to fetch them," Tsuke said.

The others nodded in understanding.

Kaede looked around the circle, realizing she had been subtly excluded from the quests. "I should return to the capital," she said. "Perhaps I can learn more there. Kachiko still has the eyes of the Scorpion. Maybe I can persuade her to tell us what she knows—to share her knowledge of the Evil One and his movements."

Uona snorted. "You'd easier pry secrets from a dead man."

"I daresay our tasks will be simple compared to that of our sister," Tomo added.

"It will be difficult, but worth trying," Tadaka said. He lifted his hands from his knees and spread his arms wide. "We ask the Sun Goddess to sanctify our decisions. May the Seven Fortunes bless our actions and preserve our people. This council is at an end."

As one, the council rose. They picked up the bowls before them—bowls that now contained only ashes. Each master turned and scattered the ashes on the River of Awakening. Then they gathered before the torii in the same order in which they had entered the sacred space.

Silently, they walked across the bridge and back along the Road of Life's Passage. When Tadaka reached the pillar near the veranda's rail, he set his empty bowl down where it had lain before. He took the ladle from the dragon's basin and washed away all trace of ash. The soiled water fell into the stone-lined pool on the garden floor. The others did the same.

Tadaka opened the trap door in the northeast corner of the engawa. He stood aside, letting the others descended before him. As they went, he took one last, lingering look at the garden.

Will I see this place again? he wondered.

WARS

I^achiko, wife of the emperor, fixed Seppun Ishikawa with her gaze. The captain of the guard fancied he saw green flecks dancing within her deep black orbs.

"Why have you come, Captain Ishikawa?" Kachiko asked, her voice like music on a summer evening. Her tone belied the momentary flash of ferocity in her eyes. Though stripped of the Scorpion name, Kachiko still wore the fine silk mask she had favored as the wife of the late Bayushi Shoji. Ishikawa found the mask disconcerting. Why does the emperor permit her to wear it? he wondered.

"My men are on edge, Kachiko-sama," Ishikawa replied. He touched his forehead to the wooden floor of the audience chamber where the two of them sat. The room was deep inside the Hantei castle, not too far from the emperor's bedroom. Kachiko sat on a thick tatami mat at one end of the room. She looked radiant in the flowing imperial robes that both

hid her figure and enhanced it. The robes spread out around her, two arms' lengths in every direction—a visible reminder of her vast sphere of influence.

Despite himself, despite knowing the scorpion that lurked beneath the pretty facade, Ishikawa still found her beauty intoxicating. He swallowed hard to fight down the feeling. When he looked up again, Kachiko was rolling her head languidly, waiting for him to continue. Her black hair fell about her shoulders like a waterfall. Her movements made a sensuous groove at the pit of her neck.

"The guardsmen know of the turmoil in the country, and yet they must sit and do nothing," Ishikawa continued. "They long to join the fight against the minions of the Evil One."

"By protecting the emperor," Kachiko said calmly, "they *do* fight the Evil One."

"They know that," Ishikawa said. "As do I. To guard the emperor is their honor as well as their duty. It is the job they were born to, and they would have no other. Yet, the emperor is ill, and an enemy to fight is one thing, but this plague—"

Kachiko nodded sympathetically.

"It robs them of their honor. It attacks the emperor where they cannot defend him. Some of the men say we should ride to the Shadowlands and wipe out the plague at its source."

"Is that what *you* say, Captain Ishikawa?" Kachiko asked, arching one delicate eyebrow.

Ishikawa face reddened. "It is not my place even to think such things, Your Highness."

Kachiko leaned back and straightened the folds of her kimono. "I already know all this, Ishikawa," she said. "I repeat my question. Why have you come?"

Ishikawa tucked his thumbs into the edge of his obi and said, "Your samurai would feel better, I think, if they could see the emperor."

"See the emperor?" Kachiko asked skeptically.

"He has not made a public appearance for some time," Ishikawa replied. "Rumors say he is dead."

"Dead?" Kachiko said. "And if that were so, why would I not have announced the fact to the world?" Her words came out terse and clipped. She frowned at him.

"The clans still vie for supremacy," Ishikawa replied. "The daimyo think that whoever wins will seize the right to succeed to the Emerald Throne. Such people don't care that the emperor still lives. Some are spreading rumors like the ones my men have heard. The royal yojimbo speculate that you are waiting to see who is the most worthy before announcing Hantei's death. Choosing the time of the announcement would be your right, of course."

"Is that what *you* think, Ishikawa?"

"No, Kachiko-sama. But I have heard it said."

Kachiko turned and straightened her robes once again, tracing the folds into intricate, origamilike patterns. "Your samurai need to hold their tongues and put wax in their ears," she said quietly but sternly. "Such talk can cost lives."

Ishikawa nodded. "Hai, Kachiko-sama. I know it. And, if it is your wish, I'll cut out the tongue of anyone speaking such lies, but..."

"But what?"

"But all these rumors would cease if the emperor himself would appear to the men."

"Impossible. He's far too ill."

"Perhaps if I were to see him, then," Ishikawa said.

The room grew suddenly cold. "Do you doubt my word that the emperor is alive, Captain Ishikawa?" Kachiko asked.

A chill ran up Ishikawa's spine. He bowed, touching his head to the floor. "Of course not, Highness," he said.

"Do your men doubt my word?"

"Of course not, Highness."

Kachiko pulled a fan from her robe and waved it open.

"The matter is settled, then."

As she spoke, the fusuma panel to her right slid open a crack. Kachiko stood suddenly, her robes ruffling about her like the fur of an angry tiger. "Who dares ...!" she began. Then she stopped, and the fury melted off her face.

In the entryway to the room stood her husband, Emperor Hantei.

Kachiko sat quickly and bowed her forehead to the floor. "Hantei-sama," she said affectionately. "I did not know you were up."

"I heard someone calling," the young emperor said. His voice had a distant, dreamy quality to it.

Ishikawa looked up as Kachiko rose and went to her husband's side. "You're not well, Otennoo-sama," she said.

She was right. The emperor looked sick near unto death. His damp black locks fell in jagged points over his forehead,

casting dark shadows around his eyes. His face had a pale cast.

The boy was thin, little more than a skeleton in a dark blue kimono. A glistening sheen of sweat shone on his skin. A sickly sweet odor—like burning flowers—accompanied him as he entered the room. His feet were bare and bony. His fingernails and toenails were long and ragged.

Only Hantei the 39th's eyes looked alive—but the life they held seemed wrong, suspicious if not actually malevolent. As the young emperor tottered into the room, Kachiko put one graceful arm around his shoulders.

"You should not be up," she said gently. "You need rest."

"Someone called me," Hantei repeated.

"Perhaps you heard us talking," Kachiko offered.

"You were talking about me?" Hantei asked, fixing her with a feverish gaze.

"Your samurai are asking for you," Ishikawa said. He rose, to help Kachiko with the emperor. Kachiko shot him an angry glance as he joined her at the boy's side. "They wish to know that you are well, Hantei-sama," Ishikawa continued.

"I am well," the emperor said. Ishikawa couldn't tell if it was an original thought, or if the plague-stricken Shining Prince was merely repeating Ishikawa's own words.

"Perhaps well enough to review the troops?" Ishikawa ventured.

Hantei glanced at him, a look of bewilderment flashing across the emperor's boyish face. He staggered forward, and Ishikawa caught him. The boy's body pressed against the captain of the guard. Ishikawa felt the heat of the emperor's fever. How can he live through such fires? Ishikawa wondered.

"I will review the troops," Hantei said. Ishikawa smelled death in the sickly sweet odor of the emperor's breath.

"Not tonight," Kachiko said gently. "It's late. You should retire. Perhaps in the morning____" She looked at Ishikawa, fire

blazing in her dark eyes.

Ishikawa's resolve melted. How could he ask this sick youth to leave the royal chambers? "Yes," Ishikawa said to the emperor. "Morning would be fine. If you are well enough."

"Well enough," said Hantei.

Kachiko turned to Ishikawa. "I can manage him myself," she said. "Captain Ishikawa, thank you for your concern. You are dismissed." She put her arm under the boy's and led him to the exit. Ishikawa bowed.

The boy paused at the threshold as if listening and asked, "Is someone calling me? Father? Is that you?"

Ishikawa suppressed a shudder. Kachiko hurried the Shining Prince back to his own chambers.

When they had gone, Ishikawa slid back a fusuma panel at the rear of the room and left. He nodded to the guards

outside the room; they nodded back. Only when he had passed into another wing of the castle did he breathe more easily.

He stopped and propped open a shutter overlooking the entryway to the castle. Sticking his head out, he inhaled deeply. The afternoon shadows had grown long, covering the courtyard below. Ishikawa recognized a figure walking toward the great gates.

He closed the shutter and hurried toward the entryway. When he arrived, he found his brother, Seppun Kiaku, speaking cordially with the guards. Ishikawa walked over to them. Seeing his brother approach, Kiaku bowed.

The younger man was neither as tall nor as broad as the captain of the guard. He did, however, share the Seppun's rugged good looks and well-honed muscles. Kiaku was dressed for traveling quickly. Only light plates of armor hung over vital parts of his body. Below them, he wore a simple tan kimono and hakima trousers. "Good to see you, Brother."

"And you as well," Ishikawa replied. "We should talk."

Kiaku nodded and bade good-bye to the guards. The two brothers turned and walked through the castle. They marched in silence through the high-beamed hall until they reached one of the many exits into the imperial gardens.

Ishikawa pushed back the shoji panel leading to the veranda outside, bowed, and said, "After you." His brother nodded and stepped outside.

They set a course beneath the cherry boughs, though the trees were now long past their bloom. "The garden seems

dryer, less healthy than when I left," Kiaku said. "Even the flowerbeds have lost their color."

"Much like the land itself, I fear," Ishikawa replied.

Kiaku nodded. "Hai. Fall comes early this year. Soon the last vestiges of color will be washed away." He paused as if thinking, and then said, "What of the emperor? Any sign of him, or does Kachiko still have him under wraps?"

"I saw him just before you arrived."

Kiaku looked surprised. "You did? How is he?"

"Not well," Ishikawa said. "The plague clings to him like a leech. The plague and Kachiko—"

"That witch!" Kiaku said. "I sometimes think she conjured up this plague just to control the empire. Her first husband died after usurping the Emerald Throne, and yet, she married the new emperor."

"The Mother of Scorpions has many legs to land on," Ishikawa said. "And many ears to hear with."

"Not in this garden," Kiaku said.

"I wouldn't be so sure." Ishikawa said. He looked around as if expecting to find Scorpion spies behind the trees.

Frowning, he turned back to his brother. "I'm glad to see you looking so well," he said. "What news from beyond the walls?" he asked. "Are you recovered from the wound those maho-using bandits gave you?"

"Yes," Kiaku said. "Quite recovered." He stated it with conviction, though his face looked uneasy. His hand stole unconsciously to his side, and he rubbed his ribs for a moment. "I healed in a geisha house in Mura Kita Chusen."

Ishikawa laughed. "That's the brother I know!"

"Then I grew restless," Kiaku continued. "Despite the ache in my lungs, I rode south into the lands of the Crane."

"You what... ?" Ishikawa exclaimed. "That was a dangerous thing to do. You might have been killed. Even with the Phoenix helping them, the Crane could be overpowered by Hoturi's army any day."

"I saw Hoturi's undead burn two villages near Kyuden Doji. The Crane couldn't stop them, and the Phoenix were little help. The Phoenix are brave, and their shugenja are resourceful—but there are only a handful of them."

"Did you see Hoturi himself?"

"No, but I met many people who had seen him commanding the undead hoards."

Ishikawa crossed his arms over his chest. "I have trouble believing it. That's not the Doji Hoturi I know."

An ironic grin flashed on Kiaku's handsome face. "I'm sure the empress would say the same thing about Yogo Junzo," he said. He stopped walking for a moment and looked to the sky. Somehow, it seemed less blue than when he had left to recover from his wounds, scarcely seven weeks ago.

"What else did you see?"

"More than you want to know, Brother," Kiaku said. "After seeing the Crane lands, I rode south, being careful to stay out of sight. The Lion are sitting on their haunches, happy to let Hoturi destroy his own people. They sweep in behind the undead army, picking over the scraps like vultures. They've hated the Crane for so long, it's poisoned their judgment."

"Matsu Tsuko would let the world go to Jigoku if it would rid her of her enemies," Ishikawa said.

Kiaku nodded and sighed. "Hai. I think so, too. The Crab feel the same way. They're holed up behind their walls, massing for war.

"You rode that far south?"

"I needed to."

"In Shinsei's name, why?" Ishikawa asked. "Why did you go on this crazy errand?"

"I needed to see for myself what was happening. I'm tired of court; tired of the empress' intrigues; tired of rumors and secondhand reports; tired of these white walls. I want to do more."

"As do I," Ishikawa said. "But it's futile. Our duty is with the emperor. Unless Hoturi marches against Ootosan Uchi itself, there's not much we can do."

Kiaku looked at the grass. The thin blades had already begun to turn brown and brittle. "Not much we can do as long as we stay here," he said. He sighed. "Sometimes, I think the Unicorn have the right idea."

"The Unicorn?" Ishikawa scoffed. "I think they'd rather protect peasants than defend Ootosan Uchi."

"Can you blame them?" Kiaku asked. "Peasants tend the land, make the earth grow, harvest the food, weave the cloth. What do we do here except wait for orders from a dying boy, or dote on the whim of an empress nursing her hatred for those who killed her husband and son?"

"Careful," Ishikawa said, his hand unconsciously stealing to the hilt of his katana. "That kind of talk could get you executed."

"I know it," Kiaku replied. He reached up and plucked a shriveled cherry from a nearby tree. "But hatred bears bitter fruit," he said. "We all need to remember that—even the empress. *Especially* the empress." He put the cherry to his lips and quickly spit it out. "Ugh! This fruit is rotten, too."

By silent agreement, the two men began walking again.

"In all my time on the road," Kiaku said, "I never felt much hope that these wars would end. The only one who's really fighting the enemy is Toturi the Black. He doesn't have many men, and they're mostly ronin, but at least he's free to act as his conscience dictates."

"Free to act without honor—and deservedly so," Ishikawa said. He turned and spat. "The emperor was right to cast him out."

"Perhaps Toturi seeks to make up for his mistakes," Kiaku said thoughtfully.

"He *can't* make up for them," Ishikawa said angrily. "He should have been there when Hantei the 38th was murdered. If he'd done his duty, maybe the empire wouldn't be in thrall to a sick boy and a scheming Scorpion. When Toturi was needed, he was nowhere to be found."

"You give him no credit for restoring the throne?" Kiaku asked.

"Not much," Ishikawa said. "If Kaede and I hadn't spirited the boy emperor away ..." A faraway look came to his eyes, and his anger faded.

"Hai," Kiaku said. "Things would have been very different. Perhaps Toturi would still sit on the throne. And if he did, who is to say whether we would be better off? But ask yourself this, Brother, if you had lost your honor, as he has, would *you* still fight for the empire as Toturi does?"

Ishikawa frowned. "That's a foolish question."

"Not so foolish," Kiaku said. "I've been thinking about it quite a lot."

"Then you're wasting your time," Ishikawa said. "Our duty is here, with the emperor."

"And with Kaede?" Kiaku added, raising his eyebrows.

"When the two coincide, yes," Ishikawa said testily.

"But if the two were to conflict," Kiaku asked, "which would you choose?"

Ishikawa stopped and turned away, facing the withering cherry trees rather than the broad ocean before them.

"That's not something I think about," he said.

Kiaku came and stood next to his brother's shoulder. Looking into the distance, past the mighty waterfall and out to sea, he said, "But we *must* think, Brother—especially now. We need to consider how we can best serve the empire."

"My duty is here," Ishikawa said sternly.

Kiaku nodded. "Hai. Perhaps, for you, it is." Then he added, "Maybe you could talk to Kaede when she returns. Perhaps you could convince her that the Phoenix should put all their effort into ending this war. After all, they can't hide in their castles forever."

Ishikawa looked at the sky. A black cloud scudded across the sun. He wondered if the cloud was smoke from some distant battle. "I fear," he said finally, "that the Phoenix will sit in Kyuden Isawa until their library burns down around their ears."

JOURNEY TO DOOM'S THRESHOLD

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f[sawa Tadaka caught a boat south at a port near Kyuden Isawa. The transportation was better suited to his brother

Tomo, but Tadaka put up with it. Traveling by ocean meant he could avoid the clashes on the continent. He didn't want to waste any time or energy fighting useless battles. Isawa Uona chanted a fair wind into the ship's sails before Tadaka left.

The captain of the ship was a Mantis trader named Otomu. Otomu was a tall, burly man who laughed frequently. Lines of tattoos ran up his arms onto his shoulders. His head was shaved bald, though he sported a long, thick mustache, the corners of which drooped past his chin. Though not opposed to profiting from war, his sympathies lay more in supplying aid to the disenfranchised—at a handsome markup. He treated his rowers with respect, and favored the crew with sake and good white rice when he felt they deserved it.

Otomu's ship skirted the coastline, stopping each night—when possible—for supplies and safe harbor.

During the trip, Tadaka often stood near the prow of the ship, listening to the waves and watching the land drift by. For the most part, the shoreline showed little evidence of the strife on the mainland.

From sea, the castle in Otosan Uchi still looked like the white-walled palace of fable. Fudotaki, the great waterfall, sprayed a cloud of brilliant haze high into the air. The mist caught the sunlight, ringing the palace with rainbows in the afternoon sun.

Nearly two years had passed since the Scorpion Coup, and the great city had been largely rebuilt. The walls of the Forbidden City were never breached during the revolt and still stood proud, tall, and impenetrable. Watchers on the ship saw no sign of the illness that held sway inside the

palace. Neither the sailors nor Tadaka could have guessed the troubles that plagued the emperor and his wife.

As they sailed past the lands of the Crane, signs of war became more apparent. Black smoke smudged the sky, and occasionally samurai fought along the shore. Wanting to avoid trouble, Otomu had laid in enough supplies for this portion of the trip. He anchored his ship offshore when his crew needed rest. Even then, they set guards, lest raiders should row out to assault them.

Those nights were tense, even for Tadaka. Often, he stayed awake until dawn, keeping watch and summoning the power of the earth far below the keel of the ship. Otomu didn't like stopping, either. Some nights, they just sailed on. The crew rowed to supplement Uona's winds—which were flagging now that they'd left Phoenix lands far behind. The crew took the oars in shifts until they could row no more.

Tadaka's heart sank when he saw Kyuden Doji, at the heart of the Crane provinces. Even distance and fog could not conceal the damage to the mighty Crane palace. Fires burned outside the walls, and Tadaka wondered if the castle lay under siege, or if it had already fallen.

Beyond the castle lay the Seikitsu sano Yama no Oi, the Spine of the World Mountains. The great peaks tumbled down to meet the ocean, their massive cliffs causing the sea to fly up in towers of spray and foam. Tadaka marveled at the mountains' power and majesty. No matter how often he saw them, he never grew tired of the sight. Even from this distance, he felt their vigor. In his heart he heard the song of stone calling to him.

Once they passed the mountains, the smoke of war lessened. Tadaka knew that many Crane had retreated here,

into Asahina lands. He wondered if Shiba Tsukune and Shiba Ujimitsu were among the refugees. He had heard no news of Ujimitsu for some time, and that worried him. The Phoenix Champion was not dead—if he had been, a new champion would have risen from the ashes to take his place. Still, that did not mean Ujimitsu was having an easy time of it.

After passing the mountains, Captain Otomu set ashore. The ship's supplies had grown thin, and the men needed rest. For their landing, they found a small village in a quiet cove. While harbored there, they heard news of fighting in the foothills of the Spine of the World, but the peasants could offer nothing more.

The next morning Tadaka, Otomu, and the crew set out on the final leg of their trip. They skirted the peninsula at the southern tip of Crane lands and made for the Crab coast. Later, the captain would return with his men to Niwa Shita no Kage Toshi, the palace of the Daidoji Crane. First, though, Otomu had been well paid to set the Master of Earth down where Tadaka desired.

The crew grumbled when they realized where Otomu was leading them. His stern gaze—and promises of extra sake—quieted them soon enough. They set Tadaka ashore on the edge of the Yugure Yama, the Twilight Mountains. Years of war with the Shadowlands had taken their toll on this land. Tadaka felt the pain of the earth when he first set foot to soil. Waving good-bye to Otomu, the shugenja-samurai steeled himself for the ordeal to come.

He had landed south of the Kaiu Kabe, the wall protecting the Emerald Empire from the Shadowlands. Here, the bones of the mountains shielded the people of Rokugan from the minions of Fu Leng. Past the mountains, another barrier lay between good and evil—Kuni Areno—the Kuni Wastes.

Originally controlled by the Crab, this fertile plain had fallen victim to Shadowlands forces. The Crab had regained the area only after centuries of brutal warfare. Endless battles, both physical and magical, destroyed all life in the plain. Now nothing remained but a vast wasteland. Only half-mad Kuni shugenja lived there, though Kuni witch hunters patrolled the area, too, rooting out and destroying Shadowlands influences. Tadaka would not have to cross the Kuni Wastes during the outward part of his journey—though he might have to on his way home.

He set sandal to stone, and the power of the earth flowed through his veins. In the distance, he felt the corruption of Fu Leng seeping into the sacred land. Tadaka had come here many times before, to fight Shadowlands creatures, but he never grew accustomed to the evil taint.

Calling on ancient magics to lighten his feet and guide his steps, Tadaka set a course west, toward the Shadowlands. He fairly flew across the countryside, running faster than a horse could gallop. The difficult terrain presented no problems for him. The land itself was his friend—it did everything possible to ease his passage.

At the end of the second day, he stood on a low ridge above the Shadowlands and gazed down into the evil desolation below. Gray fog quickly sprang up in the morass, limiting his vision. Everything in sight looked black and corrupt. Nothing wholesome grew here.

Somewhere beyond the clinging mist, at the center of the Shadowlands, where all the earth became dead and soulless, lay the rotting corpse of Fu Leng. The evil kami had fallen from heaven and died at the hands of Shinsei and the Seven Thunders. Now he waited asleep in his crypt, corrupting all he touched and preparing to rise once more. The time of his

awakening drew near; Tadaka could feel it. The earth screamed ever more loudly with the Evil One's presence.

Fu Leng was a distant threat, though, and Tadaka hoped never to see his foul mausoleum. Nearer than Fu Leng's tomb lurked Junzo, the Evil One's herald. How much nearer, the Phoenix shugenja couldn't guess. He knew only that many dangers loomed between this place and his goal. The Master of Earth readied himself for the ordeal.

He checked his weapons. His katana and wakizashi were in order, honed fine and studded with jade along their length. The green stone, sometimes called Amaterasu's Tears, was proof against Shadowlands magic and deadly to Fu Leng's minions. Tadaka also carried simple jade tokens, adaptable to whatever use he might need, and a supply of jade darts and daggers. A large jade amulet hung at his throat. The talisman was his chief protection. It would absorb evil Shadowlands energies during his trip, gradually blackening as its power waned. A bag of jade powder at his belt would cleanse any wounds he sustained.

Wounds would be his greatest threat. Even the smallest cut might become infected with the Shadowlands taint. Those tainted soon became creatures of evil, pawns of Fu Leng. Tadaka didn't know if even his great power could ward off the unholy disease.

He inhaled deeply. The air of the mountains was sweet, though it contained an undercurrent of the blasted landscape below. This would be his last breath of clean air for a long time.

Clearing his mind, he chanted prayers to the earth, Amaterasu, and the Seven Fortunes. Tadaka adjusted the yumi bow and quiver of jade-tipped arrows on his back and

the pouches of supplies at his belt. Then he descended into the dark mists.

"Wait!" a voice called out.

The cry startled Tadaka; he had thought himself alone. Drawing his sword, he turned toward the sound.

A robed figure moved through the rocks above him. The figure wore a hood, and the setting sun cast long shadows upon his face. He used a tall wooden staff to steady himself as he walked among the boulders.

"Father?" Tadaka asked.

The man shook his head. "No," he said. "Merely a friend." He continued to walk downhill toward the Master of Earth.

Beneath his hat, Tadaka's eyes narrowed. "In this place? I doubt it. Stand your ground and state your purpose, or I'll kill you before you take another step."

The figure paused, and then sat down on a tall rock. He laid his staff across his lap and laughed. "You have a strange way of treating your friends, Isawa Tadaka." The stranger wore a green cloak and a hood that shadowed his eyes. His face, what could be seen of it, was strong and masculine. A small mustache decorated his upper lip.

Below the cloak he wore light armor over a red kimono and hakama. He carried the daisho swords of a samurai, though he wore no mon to indicate a Clan affiliation. The top end of his staff was carved into the shape of a flute. The man's eyes sparkled beneath his hood, and he said, "You're a hard man to catch up with, O Master of Earth."

Tadaka frowned. "I've heard of you," he said. "You're called the Hooded Ronin. They say you fight the Evil One, though no one knows much about you. You've been seen in Dragon lands. Why are you here?"

"I told you," the ronin said. "I came to see you. To warn you, actually." He picked up his staff and blew across the end of it. Strange music drifted out of the carved flute and echoed off the rocks.

"Warn me?" Tadaka said, his eyebrows rising behind his hood. "Warn me of what?"

"To warn you against this errand, Tadaka," the ronin said, pausing his tune for a moment. "It will be your doom."

Tadaka crossed his arms over his chest. "Do you see the future, then?" he asked. "I hadn't heard you were a prophet."

The Hooded Ronin shifted on his rock and laid down his staff once more. "From time to time I see shadows of things to come," he said. "Sometimes the portents are cloudy; other times, they are as clear as a summer day. I do not know what will happen to you in the Shadowlands, but I do know this: your doom awaits yonder, Isawa Tadaka. Turn back, before it is too late."

"It is my duty to my clan and the world to go," Tadaka said.

"Even if that duty would destroy your clan?" the ronin asked. "Even if, perhaps, it would doom the world?"

"Are you Shinsei to talk this way of the world's end?"

"Fu Leng is coming," the ronin said. "You know that as well as

I."

"That's why I must do this."

"No, it is why you must *not*. There are other ways to fight the Evil One. Better ways. In your heart, you know it."

Tadaka waved his hand dismissively and began to walk downhill. "If that's all you have to offer, I'll be going. You fight Fu Leng in your way. Leave me to fight him in mine."

The Hooded Ronin rose and called after him. "I can't stop you," he said. "To do so would bring an even worse catastrophe. But I must try to get you to understand."

"Go away," Tadaka replied. "I have serious work to do."

"Very well," the ronin said. "May Amaterasu watch over you, Isawa Tadaka."

Tadaka turned back. "And you, Ronin. We'll meet again, I'm sure."

The ronin shook his head. "Only when the end of the world is nigh." He stepped to his right, between two rocks. Tadaka tried to follow him with his eyes, but the late afternoon sun blinded him momentarily. When the Master of Earth's vision cleared, the ronin was gone, though the eerie music from his flute still haunted the hills.

OB

Tadaka shook his head to clear his thoughts and continued his descent. The rocks grew smooth and black as he walked down slope— as if they'd been blasted by vast energies. The plants on the mountainside had withered and died as well.

Those that survived had a twisted, unwholesome appearance.

Soon he stood on the edge of the shadowed wasteland. He rested a moment, letting the remaining good earth lend him strength. His mind went down into the rock, into the soil beneath him. His consciousness stretched out into the land beyond.

The darkness didn't appear all at once. Rather, it seeped along the surface, pushing the purity of Rokugan deeper and deeper until it swallowed it entirely. Tadaka knew from experience that he would still be able to call on the earth's power for a time—though it would become more difficult the further he traveled into the Shadowlands.

Taking a final breath, he set his left foot upon the blackened soil and walked into the heart of darkness. Gray fog quickly swallowed him.

Time and direction held little meaning in the Shadowlands. Tadaka knew this from previous journeys. Experience alone would guide him through the cursed place while he sought his target—Yogo Junzo.

He needed to find Junzo and uncover the secrets of the Black Scrolls. He wondered, briefly, how his fellow council members were faring on their quests. Had they returned to Kyuden Isawa yet? Or were they still struggling to retrieve the scrolls hidden by the Phoenix long ago?

The ground beneath Tadaka's feet was alternately hard and spongy. The gray fog took on a dim glow, as if the light of day and the blackness of night flowed together here. The Master of Earth knew it would be a long time before he saw either Amat-erasu or Onnotangu—Lady Sun or Lord Moon—

again. This never-ending murk sapped the will and caused travelers to make mistakes in judgment. Tadaka vowed to stay alert.

Furtive things scuttled all round him. The noise came from plants as well as animals; some of the vegetation in this cursed place could walk. Many times he spun, his sword in hand, to confront a threatening sound. He found nothing save the cloying fog.

Mires and crevasses waited to devour the unwary. Rivulets of poisoned water ran across Tadaka's path. Any food or water in this area undoubtedly carried the taint. Tadaka had brought provisions enough for a long quest—perhaps the longest he had ever been on.

He remembered his last journey into the darkness. He had come seeking the Oni no Akuma, as he had many times before. The oni was a terrible demon. Long ago it had been summoned by Tadaka's ancestor, Akuma, who gave the monster his own name to bind it to his service. The demon had served only until it could slay Akuma and those he loved. After completing its revenge, the monster fled to the Shadowlands, where it lived to this day.

As a youth, Tadaka had vowed to seek out the demon and redeem his ancestor's name. Many times he had ventured into the Shadowlands to find the monster. He saw the demon rarely, and then only fleetingly. Once he nearly defeated it, but it escaped. Another time, he was lucky to escape with his life. Mostly, his quests ended in bitter disappointment.

Perhaps I shall find it this time, he thought. He pushed the idea aside. Oni no Akuma was not his mission, not this time.

Already the oppressive atmosphere of the Shadowlands closed in around him. The gray mist clung to his kimono, pressing the red and black silk against his skin. The stale air invaded his nose and mouth, trying to creep into his lungs. Tadaka pulled his hood up tighter around his face, so that only his eyes showed, and said a silent prayer.

He kept walking, listening to the earth as best he could, trying to find the path to Junzo's lair. He felt the powerful darkness of Fu Leng, far to the south and west. The earth screamed in fear at the violation of the Evil One's presence. That sound, echoing in Tadaka's mind, nearly drowned out all else. The Pit of Fu Leng, birthplace of plague and demons, festered beyond the tomb, adding to the obscene cacophony. Tadaka heard oni scrabbling across the soil like black spiders running through his skull.

The Master of Earth found it nearly impossible to ignore the cries of the violated earth. He chanted a sutra to the Seven Fortunes and calmed his mind. These monsters, no matter how vile, were not the evils he sought today.

Yogo Junzo's traces weren't as apparent as those of the sorcerer's undead master. Tadaka made his mind very quiet and listened intently. Finally, he heard it—like a twisted accompaniment to a funeral song. He followed Junzo's whispers in the tainted earth, and walked northwest, ever deeper into the Shadowlands.

Tadaka soon grew tired. He wondered if it were dark now in Kyuden Isawa. The sun had been setting when he met the Hooded Ronin at the edge of the blasted plain. The Master of Earth cursed himself for not waiting the night in the foothills. Another good sleep before challenging Fu Leng's realm would have served him—and his clan—better. The weariness of this land was unnatural, and the earth did not

renew his strength quickly or easily. He had been rash to enter the Shadowlands as he did. This blighted country would not forgive many such mistakes.

Out of the waste, a huge bolder jutted like a broken tooth. Tadaka found shelter on the rocky mound beneath it and gathered some stunted grasses and twigs to make a small fire. Fire would drive the mist away, at least momentarily. His spell kindled the sticks, and soon a bright yellow blaze burned.

Tadaka drew forth a jade vial of water from inside his kimono. He put it to his lips and drank, savoring the sweet purity. Some dried seaweed completed his meal. With his eyes still open, he drifted into meditation.

Refreshed, he stood up. The top of his wide hat brushed against the overhanging rock. He concentrated, seeking his path once more. When he felt certain of the direction, he walked to the edge of the surrounding stone. He poised his foot above the tainted soil, steeling himself to brave the dark country again.

"Don't step in that!" a voice cried out. The sound was high and thin and had a musical quality.

Tadaka spun but saw no one. Turning back, he lowered his foot toward the blasted soil.

"Stop! Don't you know that's dangerous? That's the edge of a hidden mire!"

Tadaka still saw no one. With his toe he kicked a small stone from the rocky mound onto the dirt. It landed softly and sank quickly without a sound.

Behind his hood, Tadaka smiled. "Many thanks, my friend, whoever you are."

"You have to be more careful, or you'll get yourself killed out here," the voice said. "This is no place for novices to be wander-ing."

Tadaka laughed. "I'm no novice." Growing tired of talking to someone he couldn't see, he stretched out his fingers and twirled in a circle, casting about him with magical energy.

"Hey! Watch it!" the voice cried. "Ouch! That stings!"

Tadaka heard a soft *thump* and turned in time to see a small, red-skinned creature fall to the ground. It was less than half his height, the size of a small child. The creature was built like a child, too—an ill-fed one with a round belly and emaciated limbs. Its head was too large for its body, and its golden eyes were too large for its head. It had a wide mouth filled with mismatched teeth. Small batlike wings jutted from its back.

"Mujina," Tadaka said, sighing.

"My name is Ob, if you must know," said the mujina. It got up off the ground and dusted itself off.

"Begone, creature," Tadaka said, a hint of disdain in his voice. "I have no time for your games."

"Ah, but you had time for me to save your life," Ob said. He flutted his small wings and rose into the air. "Where I come from, that means you owe me a debt."

Tadaka frowned. "While your warning was appreciated, it hardly saved my life. The mire is no more than an

annoyance to me.

"So *you* say," Ob replied. "From where I'm hovering, I'd say it was lucky you weren't killed before you ran into me."

Tadaka decided that his best strategy was to ignore this creature. Now that he wasn't concentrating quite so hard on finding Junzo, he saw the quagmire easily enough. He discerned a path across the obstacle and started walking.

"It seems to me," Ob said, fluttering behind the Master of Earth, "that you need a guide. I know the quickest ways back to human lands. You're going in the wrong direction, you know."

"I'm not going to human lands," Tadaka said, walking away from the creature. "I have business in this foul place."

"The only business most people get into here is dying," Ob said. He sped up and flew in front of Tadaka. There, he continued to float backward as the Master of Earth walked. "Only the Kuni know their way around here. If you'll pardon my saying, you're no Kuni."

Despite himself, Tadaka smiled. "I need no companions," he said gravely. "The mission I'm on is very dangerous." Tadaka pulled his hat down to screen his face from the mujina. He kept walking.

"More dangerous if you don't watch where you're going," Ob said. "No wonder you almost stepped into a hidden mire. Tell you what, I'll tag along with you for a while."

"Please, don't bother."

"It's no bother," Ob said. "You owe me a debt, and keeping me company is how you can pay it off. A guy gets lonely in a place like this, you know." He flitted forward and lifted Tadaka's hat.

Tadaka swatted at him with one hand. "I owe you nothing," he said.

"Well," said the mujina, "either you owe me a debt, or I'm responsible for you. Those are the two things that can happen when you save someone's life. Either way, I'm going to travel with you. You might as well get used to it."

Annoyed, Tadaka picked up a stone. He rested it in his palm and brought his hand up to his mouth. He whispered something. The stone shot off his palm and streaked toward the mujina's body. The rock hit the creature in its wide belly, but passed harmlessly through.

"Now that was rude!" Ob humphed. He scowled, crossed his arms over his chest, and vanished.

Tadaka looked around, but he saw no sign of the creature. He adjusted his hat and kept walking. The smells of decay grew stronger as he went. He wasn't sure, now, how long he had been walking. Had night turned into day once more? There was no way to tell in this cursed place. The landscape surrounding him had become a uniform gray—all fog and swirling mist.

The Shadowlands whispered around him, a disquieting sound that reminded Tadaka of a million crawling insects. The call of some fell beast echoed through the mist. Oozing, bubbling noises came as a hidden mire claimed a victim.

"Miss me yet?" asked a voice.

"No," Tadaka said flatly.

Ob darted in front of the shugenja once more. "Have I been rude to you? I don't remember being rude to you. But you're certainly being rude to me."

"I told you, mujina, I'm busy." He quickened his pace and walked past the creature.

"I told you, rude human, my name is Ob. You haven't told me your name yet. Pretty rude, considering I saved your life."

Tadaka paused and looked back. The mujina sat in the crook of a blasted tree. It had its hands propped on its knees and

looked very annoyed. Tadaka peered at it, trying to discern any magical deception. He saw none. The mujina was simply what it

was.

"Well?" the mujina said. "Are you going to tell me your name, or must I call you 'rude human' during our travels together?"

"For one thing," Tadaka said, "we are *not* traveling together. For another, I have no intention of giving my name to any creature I encounter in this forsaken place."

"If that's the way you want to be ... " Ob flitted into the air and hovered above Tadaka's head. "Should I call you 'lord high rude human-sama,' or just 'rude-sama?'"

Tadaka turned and strode away. He hoped that if he ignored it, the mujina would get bored and go away.

"So, Rude-sama, tell me about yourself," Ob said.

Tadaka didn't answer.

"Where do you come from? Do you have family?"

Tadaka kept walking.

"I'm only asking so that I can notify your next of kin once you get yourself killed."

A small rise loomed in front of the Master of Earth, and he mounted it in three quick steps. Spells to rid himself of the bothersome imp flashed through his mind, but he discarded them. No need to waste magic on this annoying creature. He crested the rise and descended toward a flat plain.

The fog blew away, a curtain parted by invisible hands.

Bones littered the cracked and brittle ground before him. To his left rose the skeleton of a tree. A shadow moved in the fog on the other side of the clearing.

"Uh-oh!" Ob said. He vanished.

Tadaka put his hand to the hilt of his katana.

Out of the mist stepped a tall, lean woman dressed in a white kimono. She carried a long, double-pointed spear, and wore a green, demon-faced mask. Her black hair hung down past her hips and fluttered about her as she walked. She moved like a phantom, gliding quickly over the ground.

She spotted Tadaka and lowered her weapon for combat.

THE WAY OF WATER

Isawa Tomo knew he could put it off no longer. All morning he had avoided his duty, but now, the hour was growing late. Probably his brethren had completed their tasks already.

It was not like Tomo to shirk his duties— but this errand gave him no pleasure.

At daybreak he had sat by a river and told stories to a group of children he had never met before. He spoke of Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, and her husband, Onnotangu, the Lord Moon. He told tales of Shinsei and the Serene Prophet Uikku. What the children liked best, though, was to hear the exploits of Shiba Ujimitsu, the Phoenix Champion.

Tomo didn't know Ujimitsu as well as his brother Tadaka did, but he still knew many thrilling tales of the champion. For his part, Tomo was glad to keep his young charges entertained. When the children had been called off to help their parents in the fields, Tomo busied himself elsewhere.

He found an old woman carrying clothes to the riverbank and helped her do her wash. Like the children, she never suspected Tomo's true identity. She was happy just for the help and companionship.

After that, he sat by the shore of Umi Amaterasu, the Sea of the Sun Goddess, and built sandcastles. The children who flocked to see his work were delighted. First he built Kyuden Isawa, then Shiro Shiba, and finally great Otosan Uchi itself. The children gathered fiddler crabs and sand hoppers to populate the castles and minnows and hermit crabs to guard the moats.

Building sandcastles only reminded Tomo of the castle he was avoiding. Finally, his heart heavy, he walked to a

deserted quay and paid for a small skiff. The boat's owner wanted to go with Tomo, to row the Master of Water wherever he wanted to go, but Tomo would have none of it. His mission was too dangerous for peasant fisherman, or even for most heroes.

To the Master of Water, it would be little trouble. Tomo climbed aboard the small boat, painted blue to match the sky. Probably the fisherman hoped fish wouldn't be able to see the boat that way. Tomo smiled at the conceit.

Using the oars, he paddled out from the quay and into the open ocean. Sailboats darted about in the distance, chasing fish or perhaps sailing just for pleasure. This trip would be no pleasure for Isawa Tomo.

It had taken Tomo two days to walk up the coast to this point, and most of this day to work up his courage. The other Elemental Masters would think him silly, no doubt, putting off such a simple task. Certainly Tsuke would. The Master of Fire brooked little nonsense when he led the Council of Five. Fortunately, Tadaka had assumed a greater leadership role recently. The Master of Earth was more forgiving of Tomo's foibles.

Tomo couldn't whisper wind into the boat's small sails, like his friend Uona could, but he had other means at his disposal. Sitting in the stern of the craft, he began to sing. The song was clear and rhythmic like the waves, and strong, like surf crashing on mighty cliffs. Water rose around the boat and bore her forward.

Swiftly she ran, outpacing even the dolphins, who swam near the gunwales to get a look at the Master of Water. "Who are you?" their laughing faces seemed to ask. But when they

saw Tomo they asked no more. Instead they jumped high into the air More submerging once more. Tomo smiled.

Propelled by the heaving of the sea, the Master of Water reached his destination quickly. The sun had barely crept past noon when he slowed his craft. No other boats plied the ocean at this point. No fishermen cast their nets or lines. This spot, the locals knew, was accursed.

Tomo looked back toward the distant shore. He could just see the outlines of the ancient jetty where it met the surf. A shadow ran below the surface to where Tomo sat in his boat. He changed his song, and the boat anchored itself in the waves.

long ago, a castle, Umiakari no Shiro—the "Sea Light," occupied this spot. It had been a lighthouse, a beacon to sailors and fishermen. The castle had been erected at the end of a long stone causeway. For years it withstood the assault of storm and sea.

Two hundred years ago, though, an earthquake cracked the castle's bedrock foundations. The tsunami that followed pushed (he Sea Light beneath the waves, drowning its daimyo and her retainers. Peasants said that the lady and her followers still lived beneath the waves and that the place was haunted. They called (he spot Shiro ga Shizumi Umi—"Sea of the Drowned Castle." That was why no boats sailed her waters.

Tomo did not fear the castle or its inhabitants. He feared what waited within. He stood in the prow of his tiny boat and chanted a prayer to Amaterasu. Then he jumped, feet first, over the side. The dark waters embraced him.

The ocean was cold for the time of the year. It nipped at Tomo's ears, toes, and fingertips. He opened his eyes. The world around him was a blue-green dream. Above him, he saw the disc of the Sun Goddess blazing down through the water. The ocean danced and sparkled with her light.

Tiny silver fish darted to and fro. Fist-sized squid rose from the depths to eat them. When the squid saw Tomo, though, they jetted away into the darkness. In the distance, Tomo heard the cries of whales. The leviathans' mournful songs seemed appropriate to this haunted place.

As Tomo swam downward, the waters protecting their master, providing him air to breathe. Great kelp beds rose up from the ocean floor below. The fronds tickled Tomo's skin as he swam through them. He laughed, forgetting for a moment the grim nature of his errand.

Soon, the light thinned, and so did the seaweed. When the last fronds parted, Tomo found himself swimming in an azure void, descending into indigo darkness. Down he went, deeper and deeper. Had he not been the Master of Water, the pressure would have crashed his frail body, but the ocean cherished him. Here he was truly at home.

It loomed out of the darkness like a white ghost: Shiro ga Shizumi—the "Drowned Castie." The castle listed seaward from the endless tug of waves, but its powerful magic kept the ancient fortress from crumbling. The castle's crooked battlements stretched up toward the light that would forever be denied them. Atop them all thrust the proud tower that had once housed the bonfires so friendly to sailors. Barnacles covered its sides and pale corals added their distinctive touches. Squid and viper-fish swam in and out of the lighthouse's windows, chasing each other in an endless parade.

His objective lay in the heart of the structure. The tower's top had been completely encrusted by coral and other hard-shelled marine life. The lower part of the structure had no windows. Its sole door stood blocked by tons of fallen masonry. Tomo didn't have time to move those rocks.

He chose the lowest window, though its was too small even for his lithe body. Tomo summoned an appropriate spell. He pictured the kanji in his mind and made the sinuous motions required. The water embraced him; he became one with it. He reached out and stuck one hand in through the narrow opening.

The rest of him followed the hand, flowing through the window like the body of a jellyfish. Once inside, the Master of Water resumed his own form. It was pitch black, but Tomo didn't need eyes to see. The ocean whispered its secrets to his mind. To him, the castle was lit by brilliant blue light.

A stairway spiraled down the middle of the keep. Tomo swam down the central shaft toward the tower's base. At the bottom of the stairway he found a portal. Once a wooden door had sealed the tower against intruders, but the door had long ago succumbed to sea worms. The castle was not without its guardians, though.

On each side of the door rested a huge Heike crab the size of a grown man. Markings that resembled samurai faces glowered on the creatures' carapaced backs. Legend said the crabs were samurai who had drowned in a long-ago sea battle. Looking at the monstrous crustaceans, Tomo could well believe it.

The creatures spotted him and immediately blocked the doorway with their long, armored legs. They raised their huge claws and snapped menacingly toward the intruder.

"I am Isawa Tomo," Tomo said calmly, "Phoenix Master of Water. I come to see your mistress on an errand of utmost importance. You will let me pass."

The crabs clicked to each other for a minute. Then they moved aside, opening the doorway. Tomo swam through.

Beyond he found a vast chamber. Seaweed filled the place, hanging in the water like green and brown curtains. How the plants grew without the light of Amaterasu, Tomo could not guess. Weeds danced in the currents like snakes undulating through the water.

Tomo swam gently through the weeds, making his way to the far side of the room. They parted to reveal a huge chair made of shells and the skeletons of sea creatures.

In the chair sat the body of a woman, blue from death and shriveled by the ocean's salty depths. A white kimono of seaweed wound about her emaciated form. Her pale hair drifted in the currents. A necklace of pearls hung at her throat. Bracelets of pearls and shells adorned her wrists and ankles.

Her eyes were closed and her mouth open. She looked ancient. She didn't breathe. She didn't move, save with the room's currents. Across her breast she clutched a scroll case of pure white crystal.

Tomo swam forward. He reached out to take the scroll. His fingers brushed the case's crystal surface.

The woman's eyes blinked open.

Tomo, startled, took away his hand.

"Isawa Tomo," the drowned lady said, "the waves whispered to me of your coming."

"Lady Heike," he said, "I did not know you still lived."

"I exist," she said. "I wait. My castle will rise again at the end of the world. Has that time come?"

"I pray not," Tomo said. "My brethren seek to postpone that day indefinitely."

"So sad," she said. "In the end there will be peace. Peace like there is here, beneath the waves. Have you come to join me, Isawa Tomo?"

Tomo shook his head. "I cannot. I have a mission to complete."

"You've come for the scroll," she said.

Tomo nodded.

"Will you take it though it will mean your death, Isawa Tomo?"

"What is my death, compared to the end of the world?"

"Nothing," she replied, "unless your death hastens the day. When the Mistress of Water gave me the scroll long ago, she told me I would give it up before the world ended and the man who I gave it to would hasten that end."

"Never!" Tomo said. "I will use the scroll to fight the evil that engulfs Rokugan."

Lady Heike shook her head, and her white hair billowed out into the water like a halo. "Even the wise cannot see their own face," she said. "In any case, I return the scroll to you that it may quicken the day when my castle rises. Take it if you will."

Tomo reached out and seized the scroll case in both hands. He pulled. At first, it seemed the drowned lady would not let go. Then her stiff limbs gave way, and her long fingers uncurled. Tomo clutched the scroll to his breast.

"Stay with me," she whispered to him, her voice as sweet as the ocean's depths.

"I cannot," Tomo said again.

"Then begone," she replied. The seaweed drifted between them like a curtain, blocking her from sight.

Tomo turned and swam back through the castle to the surface. The window was barely large enough to pass the scroll

through. For just a moment, Tomo wondered if he was doing the right thing. Then he shook the feeling off and rose quickly to his boat.

Poking his head above water, he put the scroll into the skiff. He climbed aboard and collapsed, gasping for air. Never had an undersea journey affected him this way before.

As he lay amid the timbers, the sun arced west behind the mountains. Stars peeked out in the sky.

Tonight, Tomo thought, I will sail back to Kyuden Isawa. If it takes all night, I will not rest until this damnable scroll is

safe in the Isawa library.

Then tomorrow, he thought, I will laugh with children once more. I will build castles in the sand and fly kites on the beach. I will swim with the dolphins until I can swim no longer. Then I will watch the sun set over the mountains and wait for it to rise again out of the sea, like a Phoenix reborn.

Tomo sat up and chanted until the water did his bidding. Using the stars as his guide, he set course for home and family.

THE BLACK EARTH

Tadaka peered at the woman across the short distance that separated them. The manner of her dress told him she was a Kuni witch hunter. The question remained, though: was she a live witch hunter, or one of Fu Leng's undead minions?

Her mask gave him the answer. Looking closely, he saw that it was made entirely of jade. True, the green stone was pockmarked and scarred with darkness, but it had not yet been destroyed by the Shadowlands taint. No creature of Fu Leng could bear to wear such a mask. The witch hunter remained human.

Tadaka took his hand from the hilt of his katana.

"I am Isawa Tadaka," he said. "I mean you no harm."

"How can I be sure you're not an illusion, or a demon in disguise?" the witch hunter asked.

Tadaka reached around his neck and pulled out his jade amulet. He touched the green

stone with his fingers. "The same way," he said, "I can be sure you are what you seem."

The witch hunter lowered her forked spear. "My pardon, Tadaka-san," she said. "I have journeyed long in shadow, pursuing our enemies. Even with all my skills, it is sometimes difficult to tell truth from deception."

"You're tired," Tadaka said.

The face behind the mask nodded.

"I have pure food and drink if you'd like."

"Thank you, Tadaka-san," she said. "My provisions ran out yesterday. That is why I abandoned my hunt. It burns my heart to let the creatures escape, but I must return to my own lands for rest and provision."

"I cannot resupply you, for my own journey may be long," Tadaka said, "but I can offer you this small amount."

The witch hunter walked toward him. "Any amount is a blessing. Thank you, Tadaka-san."

The Master of Earth nodded. She, like many Crabs, disdained the formality of refusing a gift three times before accepting it. He reached into his robes and removed a vial of water and a portion of dried fish. He handed them to the woman.

She took them and lifted the front of her mask, exposing her mouth to partake. Tadaka wondered what she looked like beneath the scarred jade. Her pale, thin lips and pointed chin gave him little hint. Tadaka gestured that they should sit on a flat rock nearby. She nodded, and the two of them sat.

"Have you been away from home long?" he asked.

"Short? Long?" she said. "Who can tell? What does time matter in this accursed place? When I left, my son was taking his first steps. By now, he may be helping his grandfather in the rice paddies."

"The boy's father?"

She shook her head. "Dead. Killed in our constant war against the Evil One."

Tadaka nodded in understanding. "The rest of the world does not understand the price the Crab pay every day."

"It is our honor and duty," the witch hunter said. She adjusted her grip on her double spear. A blackened, fist-sized stone fell from her sleeve and rolled across the dead earth, settling near her sandaled feet.

"What's that?" Tadaka asked, raising his eyebrows.

The Kuni picked up the sphere and showed it to him. "Jade lire," she said. "Nearly destroyed by my time in the gray mists. I need my shugenja to replenish its magic before it crumbles to dust. It's a powerful weapon against the Evil One's minions."

Tadaka nodded. Though he'd never seen the sphere's like before, he understood its purpose.

"I should go," the witch hunter said. She stood and handed the jade water vial back to Tadaka.

He took it, tucked it inside his kimono, and stood as well. "Will you return to this cursed place soon?" he asked.

"As soon as I am able, until the beast I seek is dead."

"And after that?"

"I shall join my fellows in the border patrols. Only vigilance can protect the empire." She turned to go.

A massive form leapt at her out of the fog.

The witch hunter turned and brought up her spear only just in time. She forced aside the snapping jaws with the shaft of her weapon, but the beast's body struck hers, and the witch hunter toppled to the ground.

She hit hard, raising clouds of acrid-smelling yellow dust. The beast landed softly on the pads of its six, catlike feet. It spun to face the samurai, its jaws slavering. Tadaka quickly sized up the creature; he had never seen an oni like this before.

It was bigger than a lion, with the face of a wolf and six spotted legs like those of a leopard. A thick turtlelike carapace covered its body. It had three tails, each of which ended in a ball of thorny barbs. Green, glowing slime dripped from its razor-sharp teeth. The creature made a hideous cackling sound as it crouched, preparing to spring once more.

Tadaka drew his sword and ran forward. The witch hunter lay on the ground, momentarily stunned. Her left hand groped for her spear, which had been knocked from her hand in the fall. Sensing a new threat, the creature turned from its prey toward Tadaka. It sprang.

The monster's claws raked at Tadaka's eyes and midsection.

He parried the blows with his katana. Spinning, he slashed at the back of the creature's neck. His katana hit the creature's shell and skidded off harmlessly.

The oni wheeled and snapped with its wolf jaws. Tadaka stepped back and brought the pommel of his katana down on the monster's snout. The creature yelped and backed off. It arched its carapaced back, and three barbed tails darted toward Tadaka.

The Master of Earth leapt back only just in time. Tails raked the fog-shrouded air inches from Tadaka's chest. The creature opened its jaws and cackled.

The Kuni witch hunter regained her feet. As she came up behind Tadaka, she said, "It seems I have become the prey rather than the predator." She assumed a defensive stance, trying not to hinder his movements.

"This is the creature you sought?" Tadaka asked. He stepped back beside her so that they could better protect each other.

"The only one I didn't kill," she said, nodding.

"We'll rectify that now," he replied grimly.

The oni circled them. Its padded feet made almost no sound on the hard earth. Its three tails twitched through the air like nervous sickles.

"I'll take its head," the witch hunter said. "You take the tails. Watch out for its claws—they're tainted." The witch hunter dashed forward, aiming her forked spear at the monster's eyes. The monster reared up, batting at her weapon with its forepaws. For a moment, the two jousting with each other.

Tadaka sheathed his weapon and ran to the rock where they had sat. It was an arm wide, and as thick as Tadaka's waist. Chanting, he put one hand on each side of it and lifted. Earth power flowed through him, and the rock became light in his hands. He pulled it effortlessly from the ground.

The oni batted the witch hunter's spear aside, nearly forcing the weapon from her hands. The witch hunter tumbled to her right and regained her grip. She landed on her feet and warded off the monster's claws as it whirled to press its advantage.

Tadaka ran toward the battle, chanting, holding the rock before him like a shield. Seeing him, the creature lashed out with its three tails. Tadaka interposed the rock between them. The creature's spikes hit the stone, but the stone had become soft, pliant. The barbs stuck in it.

Before the monster could react, Tadaka dropped the rock, ending his enchantment. The stone returned to its usual weight and consistency. The oni howled as the rock crashed to the ground, tugging on the barbs. It thrashed its tails, but the stone held them fast.

Tadaka drew his katana and brought the blade down with sudden, deadly force. The weapon cut through the tails, just behind the monster's shell. Dark blood spouted from the wounds. The earth smoked where the blood landed.

The creature turned to bite the Master of Earth. The Kuni witch hunter charged forward, jabbing her forked spear into the monster's neck. The weapon was not jade and couldn't kill the creature, but the barb stuck.

The oni wheeled, pushing the long spear deeper into its neck. The witch hunter thrust the haft of the spear into the

ground, raising the monster off its front legs. Tadaka ran forward, his blade flashing.

Howling in pain and fury, the monster slashed at him with its claws. The talons found the silk of his red kimono, but not the man beneath. The witch hunter drew her sword; its green blade sparkled in the gloom.

She thrust at the oni's left eye. With a hideous popping sound, the sword penetrated the orb. She thrust on, through the creature's brain and out the other side. The oni howled, but it did not die.

Instead, it jerked its head to the right, pulling the blade from the witch hunter's hand. The move toppled the monster off the spear that had impaled it. The great body crashed to the earth. Tadaka saw his chance.

Swinging his blade in a wide arc, he brought it down on the monster's neck, just behind the head. His katana bit deeply once ... twice. The oni's head fell away. Its body flopped about like a beached fish and then moved no more.

Tadaka and the witch hunter stood panting. The woman regained her weapons and shook the blood from them. Tadaka cleaned his blade on the monster's furry legs.

Seeing the cuts on his kimono, she asked, "Are you injured?" Her voice held a tone of wariness.

He shook his head. "No. It didn't touch my skin, just slashed my clothing."

She nodded. "Good. Even a scratch in this hellish place can become a festering, taint-infected wound."

"I know," Tadaka said. "I've brought precautions with me, but I'll be careful nonetheless."

"I'm glad to hear it," the witch hunter said. "I'd hate to have to track you down later—especially after what I've seen you do."

Tadaka couldn't tell whether she was smiling behind her jade mask or not. "Does this end your mission, then?"

She took a deep breath and sighed it out. "Yes. For now. I'll be back patrolling the border as soon as I've rested."

"I wish you a safe journey, then," he said, "Perhaps we'll meet again, under better circumstances."

She nodded. "Perhaps. I hope so, anyway. May the Fortunes guide your steps."

"And yours."

She turned and walked off into the mist. Only after she'd vanished did Tadaka remember that he'd never asked her name. He closed his eyes and concentrated for a moment, determining the path he should take.

"Some girl," said a familiar voice.

Tadaka opened his eyes. Ob the mujina hovered before him, just out of arm's reach.

Tadaka frowned. "I hoped that you had gone," he said.

"And miss the excitement? Not likely. Do you know how tedious this place is without you? Nothing but evil for days in every direction. Nothing to see. No mischief to make.

How's a mujina supposed to ply his trade? No wonder my family moved north long ago. Demons don't make good neighbors."

"I'm surprised you didn't go with your family, imp."

Ob's round face split into a toothy grin. "I surprise myself sometimes, too."

"Why don't you surprise us *both* and leave."

"Oh, no. I'm not about to fly back to my cave and play knucklebones solitaire. I'm with you to the end, Rude-sama—or at least

I'm with you until you do something that's likely to get us both killed."

"Everything I'm doing is likely to get us both killed," Tadaka said.

Ob shook his head. "You, maybe, but not me. I'm pretty hard to hurt."

"Shall I test that, mujina?"

"Now, Rude-sama, you're not the type of person to harm someone if you don't have a pretty good reason."

"Stop calling me Rude-sama."

"Why? You haven't told me your name, yet—though I noticed you spilled it to that girl quick enough. What's she got that I don't? Never mind. Stupid question. She was kind of cute, eh? For a killer warrior type, I mean."

"I hadn't noticed. And my name's Tadaka. You can use it—sparingly—if you'll stop calling me Rude-sama."

"Hmm, Tadaka, Ta-da-ka ... Not very melodious, but you're not the musical type. Tell you what, I'll call you Tadaka if you call me Ob."

Stepping around the monster's body, Tadaka began walking again. The mists quickly swallowed him.

"Hey! Wait up!" Ob called, flitting after him.

The two of them traveled in silence for a while. Luminous fog swirled around them. Everything took on a drab sameness. In his bones, though, Tadaka's mission called to him.

Spiky black trees sprouted from the blasted soil. They reached their boughs in every direction, as if trying to drink nourishment from the glowing mist. Though the trees had no leaves, strips of flayed meat hung from their branches. No sign remained of whom the flesh belonged to.

Past the trees grew a tall thicket of sharp-bladed grass. The grass was a pale gray-green. Single, wan blossoms drooped from the tops of the tallest blades. The flowers lay closed, as if waiting for sunlight in this benighted place.

Tadaka's sandal caught in some mud before he reached the thicket, and he had to pause a minute to pull it out. Ob flew on ahead, over the blighted field. As he did, the plant stalks sprang to life. The buds opened, revealing a long, bone-white spike within each one. The grass flailed about, whiplike, trying to strike the mujina. Oily yellowish poison dripped like honey from the barbed flowers.

The plants passed harmlessly through the mujina's intangible body. "Yow!" Ob cried. "Bet that would have hurt if it had hit you."

"Takesasu plants," Tadaka said. "Common in this accursed place. They're little more than an annoyance. And easy enough to deal with." He reached into a fold of his robe and drew forth a round, flat stone with serrated edges.

Chanting, he manipulated the stone between the fingers of his right hand. It changed from one stone to two, three, four.... Tadaka brought his hands together. When they parted, he held eight stones, one between each of his fingers.

He held his hands up, parallel to his face, and snapped them forward, as if flinging water from his fingertips. The stones sailed through the air in perfect formation, spinning like shuriken as they went, buzzing with enchantment.

They hit the takesasu plant stalks at knee height, severing the long blades. The rocks didn't stop. They flew on their ordained paths until they disappeared into the swirling mists and left a wide path in their wake.

Ob looked at Tadaka, clearly impressed. "Remind me never to get on your bad side."

"You're already on my bad side," Tadaka answered. He walked down the freshly cut path, crushing stalks beneath his feet as he went. The grass squeaked and sighed, as if still fighting for life.

As they passed down the path, well out of range of the remaining weeds, Ob asked, "Where'd the stones go?" He

craned his neck high and low, but saw no sign of the projectiles.

"Returned to the elements," Tadaka said. "Destroyed by the magic that spawned them."

They walked for what could have been an hour or a day. The stale air around them didn't change, didn't show any sign of sun or moon. The luminescent mist swirled in their path, revealing its secrets slowly before their eyes. Furtive scuttling sounds filled the air, though they saw no fauna.

Finally, the long field of deadly grass ended. The land rose once more. Dark stones thrust from the soil, pushing aside pale laby roots, as if the rocks had just risen yesterday. Small, glowing insects, scampered in the twisted undergrowth at the stones' base.

Tadaka found a space between the rocks and climbed up into it. Ob flitted after him. "I'm hungry," the mujina said. "Got anything to eat?"

"Not for the likes of you," replied Tadaka.

"You gave some to the girl."

"She's human; you're not. You can fend for yourself, mujina."

"A fine way to treat your traveling companion," Ob said. "And after all I've done for you."

"What have you done for me, besides distracting me and slowing me down?"

"I saved you from those deadly whatzit-plants."

"I saw them," Tadaka said, "well before you flew into their midst." His foot slipped on some loose gravel, but he braced his hands against the rocks on each side and kept walking uphill.

"You don't like working with other people, do you?" said the mujina.

"People, yes," Tadaka said. "You ... no." A sound drifted to his ears through the swirling gray darkness—a scrabbling, squeaking sound, punctuated with dull thuds.

"Well, if you don't want my companionship, just say so," Ob said, crossing his bony arms angrily over his chest. "I warn you, though, it gets pretty lonely out here."

"Quiet!" Tadaka hissed.

Ob frowned. "If you don't want to talk, we won't talk. No need to be rude about—"

"Ob, please be quiet," Tadaka said. "I need to listen."

The mujina clamped his mouth shut. The two of them stood silently, Tadaka leaning against a huge up-thrust stone.

The sounds became clearer. Clangs punctuated the thuds—the noise of steel against steel, the sounds of battle. The other noises were scuffling and inhuman cries of pain.

"Sounds like fighting," Ob whispered.

"Over the next ridge," Tadaka replied. "Stay behind me, and for Amaterasu's sake, be *silent*"

Cautiously, the Master of Earth picked his way through the

intervening boulders to the top of the hill. He assumed the mujina went with him, though he did not look back to check.

Cresting the rise, he peered over the top of a boulder and into the rock-rimmed valley below. He saw a small village of old mud huts with ragged roofs of thatch. Among the buildings, villagers fought for their lives against a cadre of Shadowlands undead.

Skeletal warriors on horseback rode through the settlement, destroying both the hovels and the village's denizens. With the undead samurai came zombies, and near-human lesser oni. The demon-spawn's gleeful war cries filled the air.

The inhabitants of the village weren't human, either. They stood as tall as a man and wore ragtag clothes and armor and wielded makeshift weapons. The creatures' muzzles, pointed ears, and long tails bespoke their feral heritage. Nezumi, thought Tadaka—ratlings. He'd seen a few of them during his travels in the Shadowlands, but had never before encountered a ratling colony. Though they lived in the shadows of Fu Leng, the Nezumi remained untainted by his touch.

The ratling villagers fought fiercely against the Shadowlands marauders, but there were only three dozen nezumi against nearly eighty invaders. The undead had swept through a break in the rocky hillside and into the sparsely protected village. Fu Leng's minions wore armor and sat astride fell steeds. They thundered through the colony, cutting down ratlings and setting huts ablaze.

"They'll be killed if we don't help them," Ob whispered in Tadaka's ear.

"You intend to help?" Tadaka asked.

"When I said 'we,'" Ob replied, "I really meant *you*."

"Helping ratlings is not my mission."

"Sorry!" Ob replied in a huff. "I mistook you for one of the good guys." He vanished.

Behind his hood, Tadaka frowned. Stopping to help these creatures would slow him down. Time was precious, and his supplies were limited. Still, the Nezumi might have information he could use.

The Master of Earth loosened his swords in their sheaths, drew his bow, and walked over the top of the hill.

THE WAY OF FIRES

I^sawa Uona ducked back out of the way as the great bronze bell swung toward her. Fighting surrounded the young Elemental Master, filling the air with an unpleasant cacophony. Uona lay her hands gently on the great bell's surface, and it shot back toward her attacker.

The bell resounded with a mighty peal as it struck the undead samurai. Her opponent flew backward through the air. His red armor had been crushed nearly to his spine. The red samurai lay still for a moment, and then scrambled to his feet. The blow from the bell would have been enough to kill a normal man—but Junzo's minions were neither normal nor men.

Uona frowned. She leapt back, arcing high in the air, and landed atop one of the temple's buildings. She assessed the situation. While powerful within her element, Uona was not used to large battles.

The temple complex used to be beautiful, resting peacefully at the foot of a mountain. Its

red, plastered walls held ornate columns with carved golden tops. Red-tiled roofs perched atop beams with the smiling faces of kami.

Many of those buildings were now burning. All of the half-dozen showed battle scars, even though the fighting had barely begun. Gore splattered the great torii in the courtyard. The cherry trees had been hacked and set ablaze. Zombies and undead samurai trampled the garden and stained the temple's pool red with the blood of the monks.

Uona nearly wept at the desecration of the monastery. Years of meticulous care by priests of Shinsei and their people had been laid waste in less than an afternoon. Uona wished she and Tsuke had arrived sooner. Perhaps they could save something.

The Mistress of Air's eyes narrowed. Anger built like a hurricane in her breast. The power filled her, and she turned her mind to mastering it.

Melees whirled in the courtyard below, darkening the flagstones of the temple with blood. Junzo's undead minions bore tattered armor and rusty weapons. Flesh slipped from their rotten bones. With them rode a few evil ronin, better clad and equipped, but less impervious. Monks and villagers fought without armor, weapons, or training. The monks were Phoenix priests, most of them pacifist to the core. Still, they would not surrender their lives without a fight.

Isawa Tsuke, the Master of Fire, stood amid the monks, rallying them. Where his sword flashed, bodies fell. Sometimes, bodies rose to fight again—but not often. He'd

done a good job of protecting the priests and their people. He'd even pulled the scattered defenders into a cohesive unit. Given time to concentrate, the Master of Fire could bring considerable powers to bear.

Junzo's minions weren't giving him that time. Undead troops pushed Tsuke and his allies back. Soon they would run out of room to retreat.

Uona inhaled and cleared her mind. A company of fell archers spotted her on the temple roof. At a bark from their ronin commander, they fired a dark storm of arrows at her.

Uona gestured, and the winds embraced her. Her magic caught the arrows and sped them back whence they had come.

The winds imparted their fury to the shots. The archers screamed as their own arrows hit them, striking with such force that they passed entirely through the archers' bodies. The ronin leader slumped dead as an arrow pierced his eye and shattered the back of his skull. The few archers that survived fell back.

The Mistress of Air glimpsed something Tsuke didn't. A pikeman had broken through the flank of the priests' line. He aimed his weapon toward Tsuke's back and charged.

Uona leapt into the air and landed in the melee between them. Wind surrounded her body, turning aside weapons. She laced the charging pikeman and chanted, summoning her powers. The man jerked once and flew into the air, screaming. He did not come down.

Tsuke looked over his shoulder and smiled. "We were lucky to arrive when we did," said the Master of Fire. Sweat

dripped from his brow, and gore spattered his katana. "I've longed for a chance to test my skills against Junzo."

"This isn't Junzo," Uona said grimly. "These are merely his minions."

"A commander is measured by the quality of his troops," Tsuke said. He turned and cut off the head of the zombie nearest him.

"Why do they attack priests?" Uona wondered. She pointed her palms outward, and hurricane winds blew away a half-dozen raiders, crushing them against the temple's wall.

"They're here for the same reasons we are. They want the scroll."

Uona looked at him and arched her delicate eyebrows. "Can Junzo know one of the scrolls is here?"

"He must," Tsuke replied. "Why else would his minions venture so far into Phoenix lands? Why else would he spend the energy to keep them hidden? A force this large couldn't get past our defenses without magical deception."

Uona nodded, grim thoughts filling her mind. What other dangers might await them? Winds gusted against a nearby zombie's sword arm, and it cut off its own head.

Tsuke turned toward her. "Protect the priests and their charges, and I'll make short work of the rest of this rabble."

"Hai," she said. Turning to the nearest priest, she held out one delicate hand. The priest looked at her.

"Take my hand," she said. "My powers will protect you, and any who link hands with you." The priest clasped his hand in hers. He turned to the man nearest him and relayed the message. Soon, a human chain formed. Where the chain linked with Uona, a barrier of wind sprang up, buffeting back the Shadow-lands forces. The priests chanted praise to Amaterasu for her mercy.

Tsuke smiled. The temple guards formed up around him. The samurai held back Shadowlands marauders while the Master of Fire methodically dissected the best foes.

A spearman charged him. Tsuke's katana turned aside the man's blade. The spearman swept up, trying to catch Tsuke in a counterblow. The Master of Fire chopped down, slicing the spear in half. Before his foe could recover, Tsuke thrust his sword through the man's mouth and out the back of his head. The Master of Fire smiled at the look of surprise in his dead foe's eyes.

He pulled the sword out, and the spearman's body slumped to the ground. Tsuke stepped back, seeking a new foe, but the Shadowlands troops had fallen away before his fury. Glancing back, he saw that Uona's people had formed a large circle. Her power was forcing the invaders toward the temple gate. Again, Tsuke smiled.

His pleasure was short lived. A black-feathered arrow struck him in the left shoulder. The missile bit deep, nearly to the bone. Tsuke winced, and anger contorted his face. Sheathing his sword, he grasped the arrow by the shaft. Chanting, he drew the offending weapon out of his body. As he pulled, the arrow changed into fire.

"I have had enough of this," he growled.

Still holding the burning arrow, he changed his chant. A flaming bow formed in his hands. He fitted the arrow to it and pulled the fiery string to his right ear. He let fly.

The flaming arrow streaked through the air and hit the chest of a ronin mercenary. The man fell backward from the force of the blow. Then, he got up, clearly surprised to be alive. Though it still flamed, the arrow had caught in his armor. The ronin patted the flaming arrow with his gloved hand to put the fire out. His hand caught fire. He screamed as the fire quickly spread up his arm. He staggered back, bumping into several of his comrades. Where he touched them, they too caught fire.

The magical fire quickly spread among the men and everyone they touched. Soon, a great wall of flame had sprung up among the invading troops.

The priests and their guards stood in awe. Uona frowned.

Tsuke laughed, and chanted a spell while rubbing his shoulder. Fire flared from the wound, and when it died away, the injury had healed.

The Shadowlands forces turned against their burning comrades. They showered them with rocks and arrows, cutting them down before the fire could spread farther. Constant pressure from Uona's human chain pressed the invaders back to the temple gates. Less than a quarter of Junzo's forces remained.

Tsuke raised his arm above his head and brought his hand down in a slashing motion, pointing at one of the surviving samurai. A bolt of fire streaked from the sky and incinerated the man he pointed at.

He summoned the same power again and again. Soon, all the minions of the Evil One were engulfed in flame. Their dying fellows ran among them like human torches, setting fire to zombie and human alike. A merciless smile drew over Tsuke's face as he continued his pyrotechnic assault. His eyes burned with grim pleasure.

Soon, the sound of screams and crackle of fire echoed off the temple walls. Uona and the priests kept their people back, away from the living inferno. The Mistress of Air covered her mouth and nose with the sleeve of her kimono. Even through the wind, the stench of burning bodies threatened to overwhelm her.

Then another sound came—a lone, strong voice rising above the din.

"Coward!" the voice cried. "Honorless bastard!"

Tsuke's blazing eyes sought the origin of the voice. A single ronin staggered forward, out of the firestorm. He wore black armor and carried the daisho swords of a samurai; the mon of the disbanded Scorpion rested at his shoulder. At his throat hung a dark stone medallion in the shape of a star. His face blackened by smoke, he screamed his anger at the Master of Fire. "Fight like a samurai, you bastard witch!"

Tsuke raised his hand above his head as if to summon another fireball. "Pawn of Junzo," he said contemptuously, "you do not deserve a warrior's death."

"I serve my master," the samurai said, "who strikes back against those who destroyed my clan. Who do you serve, Master of Fire? A sick emperor, too afraid to leave his chambers? Pacifist clerics, holed up in their temples? Our

lord is coming, and you have not the strength to face him man to man."

Tsuke lowered his hand. Behind him, he heard Uona whisper, "Tsuke, no!" but he ignored her.

"I will destroy you personally," Tsuke said. As he stepped forward, his hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. His thumb pushed up the tsuba, the hand guard, in preparation for action.

The samurai leader of the raiders walked toward him. A triumphant smile split his smoke-blackened face. "With you gone," he said to Tsuke, "we'll make short work of the rest."

"Like your master," Tsuke said, "your confidence overmatches your skill."

"We shall see," the samurai said. He stopped less than a body length from the Master of Fire. Both of them stood stock-still— preparing for an iaijutsu duel, a test of quick draw skill.

A hush fell over the temple courtyard. Only the whisper of the wind, the roar of the fire, and the whimpers of the dying broke the silence.

The black-clad samurai moved, pulling his sword from its scabbard and aiming a cut at Tsuke's middle.

The Master of Fire moved more quickly. His blade flashed from its scabbard and sliced a long gash below the black samurai's breastplate. The former Scorpion's belly opened up, and his guts spilled out. His sword never landed its blow.

He staggered back, his intestines splashing on the flagstones. He slumped to his knees and moved no more.

Tsuke flicked the gore from his blade in the traditional shiburi move.

The stone at the dead samurai's neck began to glow. First, pale sparks, like tiny bolts of lightning, flickered across its surface. The stone seemed to open up, revealing a squalid green light within. The light danced across the samurai's face and down his dead limbs. Smiling, the creature stood and raised its sword.

"See the power of my master!" it hissed.

The creature opened its mouth wide. Bones cracked as its jaw dislocated. Inside the mouth was blackness—hissing, roiling blackness. Suddenly, a swirling ebony cloud vomited from the monster's mouth. Uona screamed a warning, too late.

Flies—millions of biting, stinging insects—swarmed the Master of Fire, covering his body in an instant. More flies aimed for the Mistress of Air, but Uona's winds held them at bay.

Isawa Tsuke screamed and writhed in pain. He dropped his katana. It clattered on the flagstones, and the flies covering it leapt up to join their brethren, smothering the Master of Fire.

The black samurai strode toward him. Tsuke, doubled over in pain, tried to look up. The undead creature raised its blade high, aiming a deathblow at Tsuke's head.

Pressed by the swarm on all sides, Uona could do nothing to help her comrade.

The black samurai brought his sword down in a sweeping arc. At the last instant, it stopped.

Tsuke had caught the blade between his palms. The edge of the sword rested only inches from his forehead. The black samurai pushed down, trying to break his opponent's grip. Tsuke began to chant.

The blade of the black samurai started to vibrate. It became warm. Tsuke straightened his body, raising the katana.

The black samurai redoubled his effort, but the blade held fast. The metal was hot now, but the undead samurai didn't feel it. The flies covering Tsuke's body popped and sizzled, bursting into puffs of black smoke.

Tsuke stood. The blade burned red hot. The Master of Fire's body burst into flames, though the fire did not harm him. Instead, it renewed his strength. His eyes shone with anger. The fire swelled from his body, engulfing the black samurai.

The undead ronin screamed once before his tongue dried up.

His eyes sizzled and burst. His skin charred and sloughed off his body in long strips. His bones turned to charcoal. His sword melted into slag. The black samurai's body crumbled into a pile of smoldering embers at the Master of Fire's feet. The unnatural flies shriveled up and died with their creator.

Tsuke stretched out his hands. Fountains of fire streaked forth. The flame blasted what remained of the undead forces, charring them utterly. The outlines of their shadows stained the plaster of the temple's walls.

In a few moments, it was over.

Tsuke let the fires die down. All that remained of his enemies was ash. He knelt and retrieved the black stone amulet from the ashes of his foe. He stood, and tucked the enchanted stone into his obi.

"Are you all right?" asked a quiet voice behind him.

Tsuke looked at his arms, covered by welts and insect bites. He felt similar wounds over the whole of his body, even under his orange and gold kimono. Turning, he gazed into Isawa Uona's pretty face. He saw worry there. He knew he must look like he'd just returned from Jigoku. He smiled.

"I'm fine," he said. "Time to claim my prize."

Uona nodded. "I'll go with you. The priests will summon the eta to clean up the mess."

Together, the two of them walked toward the temple's inner precinct. The monks who stood to each side of the great gateway bowed and opened the doors before them.

The corridor stretched away from them into the side of the mountain. Immense golden columns lined its sides and supported a ceiling lost in darkness above. No torches lit the hall, but a dim glow came from the far end of the corridor. Tsuke and Uona walked toward that glow.

Gradually, the corridor narrowed, and the ceiling slanted down to meet them. Eventually they came to a portal, barely wide enough for two to walk abreast. On the other side of the portal was a room. Within the room, the heart of the mountain lay exposed.

The temple had long been famed for its hot springs. Pilgrims traveled from all over Rokugan to visit them—at least, they had before plague struck the land. It was the heart of the mountain that gave the waters their heat. The mountain was a slumbering volcano, and its heart was molten lava.

A pool of lava lay in the small room where Tsuke and Uona arrived. Molten rock caused the air to shimmer with heat. Orange light from the fiery rock lit the room. Uona chanted a spell for protection against the heat.

Tsuke stepped to the lava-filled pond. It was as broad as a man is tall and half that deep. The back of the pool vanished into the living rock of the mountain. This inlet was merely the fingertip of the fire kami that slept below.

Tsuke rolled up the sleeve of his kimono and plunged his arm into the molten rock. His face grew tight, as if even he, the Master of Fire, felt the heat. When he removed his arm, Tsuke held a crystal scroll case in his hand.

Uona nodded her approval. "You were right," she said. "We were lucky to get here before Junzo's minions."

"My task is finished," Tsuke said.

"Will you join me on my quest?" she asked. "The mountain I seek is only a week's travel from here. Less if we fly."

Tsuke shook his head. "I have to return to my studies. There are things I need to research before the council meets again."

Uona nodded. "I understand," she said. "Shall we share tea before we go?"

"Not tea," Tsuke said, "though I wouldn't object if you joined me in a cup of sake."

THE WAY OF THE RAT

Isawa Tadaka fitted a jade-tipped arrow to his bow. Chaos reigned in the ratling village below, but Tadaka's eyes were keen, and he quickly chose a target. He selected an undead samurai on horseback. As the horseman bore down on a ratling woman and her frightened child, Tadaka let fly.

His arrow pierced the horseman through the neck. Where the arrow touched, green fire sprang up. Screaming, the zombie toppled backward off his steed and fell to the ground. The rat-woman fended off the steed with a wooden pitchfork.

Tadaka picked six more targets in quick succession. Where his arrows fell, an undead creature returned to its maker. He chose his prey carefully, always picking monsters that threatened the ratlings' lines of defense.

By the time the seventh zombie had fallen, both the ratlings and the Shadowlands forces had noticed Tadaka. The ratlings gave a cheer.

A skull-faced man on horseback pointed toward Tadaka and shrieked an order to his underlings.

Two cloaked monstrosities turned toward the Master of Earth, their eyes blazing red. They were gnarled, hump-backed creatures with green pustulant skin and corpselike faces. They threw back their cloaks and spread huge batlike wings. Leaping into the air, they flapped toward Tadaka.

Tadaka put a jade-tipped arrow through the brain of the first one. It fell in flames to the earth. He knew that he didn't have time for another shot before the second arrived, so he dropped his bow and drew his katana.

The creature swooped high over the boulders that topped the ridge and dived straight for its target. In its hand it held a black-bladed katana with a serrated edge. Whether the sword was made of metal or completely tainted rock, Tadaka couldn't tell. The Master of Earth chanted power into the stones on his blade.

The bat-thing attacked. Tadaka caught the creature's sword with his own. Sparks flew where the blades met. The creature circled, and Tadaka turned with it. The stones hanging from his round hat swayed and clattered. The creature slashed with its taloned feet.

Tadaka heard his kimono rip; the flesh along his ribs burned. He stepped away, swinging his sword in a defensive maneuver. The bat-thing bore in. The antagonists' blades met again, but this time, Tadaka spoke a word of power.

The creature's katana shattered, and the hilt splintered in the monster's hand. Tadaka cut swiftly, splitting the bat-thing's head in two. It spouted black blood and fell to the earth. The body twitched for several moments before it died.

The attack had given the Shadowlands creatures time to marshal their forces. Perceiving the Master of Earth as a great threat, two dozen zombies scrambled up the hillside.

Tadaka glanced to his left, and then his right. He smiled. He reached out and touched the tall boulders on either side with his fingertips. The rocks were pure, untainted. Their

power flowed into him. As the zombie hordes drew near, Tadaka began to hum.

Stones resonated with his song. They trembled and then shook. The zombies staggered as the earth rumbled. Surprise and fear clouded their undead eyes. The Master of Earth whispered softly to his rocky minions.

The earth opened up beneath the zombies' feet. Some fell helplessly into the abyss below. Others caught onto the edges of the gaping hole. These were crushed as huge stones fell on them. Tadaka's earthquake spread out like a great wave from where he stood.

A half dozen zombies near the village entrance heard a noise and looked up, too late. Boulders from the rocky escarpment toppled on them, crushing their corrupt bodies.

A crack in the earth opened and swallowed three undead horsemen. The ratlings they were fighting scabbled away from the pit and cheered in high-pitched squeaks.

The skull-faced commander fought to control his undead steed. The skeletal horse reared as the earth shook and stones flew around it.

Beneath zombies' feet, clay turned to quicksand. They sank up to their knees while ratling troops hacked mercilessly at them. Any Shadowlands creatures standing near open rock were crushed or swallowed. Through it all, Tadaka made sure not to harm the ratlings.

The ratlings scrambled across the ruins, putting an end to zombies that were trapped or disabled. Their squeals of joy echoed through the bowl-like valley—strange music for Tadaka's ears.

Finally, the fell commander brought his horse to rein. He fixed his blazing green eyes on the Master of Earth and chanted. Evil fire built up within his rotting body.

Tadaka reveled in the quake. He crushed his enemies with stone fingers and swallowed them whole. So rapt was he in his magics, he almost didn't see the skull-faced commander until it was too late.

The commander crossed his arms over his breast and then thrust his hands outward. A scarlet ball of fire poured from his shriveled form and streaked toward the Master of Earth.

Tadaka saw it and stopped his chanting only just in time. Reaching into his sleeve, he flicked open his jade fan. The flames hit the artifact, charring its edges. Most of the blast dissipated, though the wound in Tadaka's side burned with renewed fire. The earthquake subsided.

Tadaka put the fan away and picked up his bow. Before the commander could summon his power again, Tadaka shot two arrows. They tore through the commander's breastplate and burst into green flame.

The skull-faced man merely laughed. "You can't kill Atamashi ssso easssily."

Tadaka changed his aim, from the man to the undead horse. Before he could fire, several ratlings swarmed the fell commander. Bolstered by Tadaka's attacks, they swung their weapons and pressed in, unaware that they were spoiling the Master of Earth's aim. Two leapt onto the horse's back, clawing and biting with their sharp teeth.

Atamashi attacked the nezumi. The hooves of his skeletal steed dashed out the brains of one. The undead samurai's

black katana felled another.

Slinging his bow on his back, Tadaka leapt downhill to join the melee. He reached the battle just as Atamashi disemboweled a third ratling. The way between Tadaka and his foe lay clear. Tadaka took his round hat from his head with his right hand and plucked one stone from its brim with his left. He flung the hat, chanting as he threw.

The hat whirled toward the commander, its stones swinging to the outside. The rocks sharpened into small blades as the hat flew. The skull-faced man saw the danger and tried to wheel his horse away, too late.

The hat smashed into the horse like a great shuriken. The creature's bones shattered, and it fell, lifeless, to the ground. Atamashi spilled to the earth but quickly rose to his feet. All around, the surviving ratlings were rallying against the remainder of the undead troops. Smoke, screams, and the sounds of battle filled the air.

Tadaka's hat flew on for several feet past the shattered undead horse. Then Tadaka whispered to the stone he'd plucked from the brim. The hat arced in a wide circle, turning back toward the Master of Earth. It landed lightly in his left hand, and Tadaka placed it back on his head. He tucked the loose stone into his right sleeve and drew his katana. Atamashi stalked toward the Master of Earth, his sword at the ready.

"Ssso far from hooome, shugenja," the commander hissed.

"Where is Junzo? Where is your leader?" Tadaka said. "Is he reduced to slaughtering ratlings now?"

"Ssssoon all will fall befoore the great Junzo."

"Not unless the rest of his troops fight better than you."

"You'll sssee how well I fiiight," replied the creature. It leapt forward with inhuman speed, aiming a cut at Tadaka's neck.

Tadaka parried and slashed at the commander's ribs. The creature's black armor turned the blow aside. Atamashi whirled and thrust. His blade pierced Tadaka's kimono below the left armpit, but failed to find flesh.

Tadaka slashed at Atamashi's neck. His katana bit deep. The commander's head sailed a short distance, landed on the top of its helmet, and rolled to a stop. The body fell backward.

The Master of Earth smiled and turned away. He saw several ratlings trying to extinguish a burning hut. Beyond them, a dozen nezumi were brawling with the remains of the undead contingent. The ratlings seemed to be winning.

Several young ratlings skittered toward Tadaka, feral smiles on their furry muzzles. Their black eyes brimmed with admiration. Suddenly the happiness on their faces turned to terror. "Yeee! Look! Look!" one cried.

Tadaka spun just in time to parry a vicious cut. His sword turned his enemy's katana aside, but not fully. His opponent's black blade traced a thin line down the Master of Earth's right shoulder. Tadaka found himself face-to-face with Atamashi's leering skull. The undead commander's head sat firmly upon his shoulders once more.

Their swords met again and slid down each other until the hand guards locked. Tadaka pushed with all his might, and the undead commander staggered back.

The monster laughed. "Not so easssy to kill as you thooodought, am I?"

"Nor so hard as you believe," said Tadaka. He leapt forward, slashing at neck, breastplate, and thigh. Each time the creature beat his blade back.

The thing whirled and cut toward Tadaka's back. His blade slashed the Master of Earth's kimono but missed the flesh beneath. Tadaka chopped at the creature's chest. The Master of Earth's sword opened a wide gash on the exposed flesh below Atamashi's collarbone. Black blood oozed from the wound, but the undead commander merely laughed.

Atamashi swung in retaliation, hitting Tadaka's sword with jarring impact. Tadaka stepped back. He panted, having trouble catching his breath. The wounds on his rib and shoulder burned with unclean fire. He'd expended a lot of energy to summon the earthquake. Exhaustion tugged at the Master of Earth's sinews.

Atamashi charged , aiming his cuts in quick succession: neck, thigh, ribs. Tadaka parried them all. With each blow, his bones shook, and his wounds burned. Sweat dripped down his brow, stinging his eyes and clouding his sight. He stepped backward and almost tripped over a dead ratling. Atamashi bore in.

Tadaka met him, summoning all the strength he could into his strikes. The air thundered with the impact of swords. Their katana met. The blades slid down each other to the handgrips and locked. The shugenja's eyes grappled with those of the undead commander.

In that frozen moment, the fingers of Tadaka's left hand deftly found a small stone in his right sleeve. The Master of

Earth whispered a word of power. The stone flowed like water over his fist, forming a rocky glove.

"Now, you die," the undead commander said. Sensing Tadaka's weakness, he shoved the shugenja hard. Tadaka faltered and staggered back. The katana toppled from his fingers. Atamashi raised his sword for the kill.

Summoning all his remaining might, Tadaka thrust his left hand forward. His rocky fist shattered Atamashi's breastplate and the bone beneath. Tadaka plunged his gloved hand deep into the monster's chest.

The commander looked at the hole in his chest, his cadaverous face registering shock and fear. Tadaka pulled out his hand. In his fist, the Master of Earth held the undead creature's heart. Tadaka squeezed, and the heart crumbled into oily black lumps.

Disbelief washed over the undead commander's countenance. His sword waved in the air, as if it still might strike. Then he fell backward, his bones shattering on the hard ground.

Tadaka stood panting over the body. His rocky glove crumbled into dust, the power of the stone exhausted. The Master of Earth wiped the sweat from his brow. Then he knelt and retrieved his katana. The sounds of battle had died away. Looking around the burning village, Tadaka saw no undead left lighting. The ratlings had begun to tend to their wounded. Victory was theirs.

A young ratling approached Tadaka and bowed nervously, touching her black nose to the dusty earth.

"Pardon pardon, Master," she said. She was short, thin, and dressed sparsely in a red top and khaki hakima. A gold earring dangled from her left ear. She looked up skittishly as she ended her bow. Her whiskers twitched, and her tail swished back and forth. She bobbed her head from side to side and blinked her black, liquid eyes.

"What do you beg my pardon for?" Tadaka asked.

"Not helping too much. Not helping kill not-dead warrior," she said. She looked around, as if expecting to be attacked again at any moment.

"You shouted the warning that saved my life," he said.
"That's more than enough service."

She bowed again. "Domo domo, Master." The lips of her muzzle pulled back from her sharp teeth in an uncomfortable smile.

"What's your name, girl?"

"Chi'ka'chi-tkk," she said, bowing again and looking at the Master of Earth with her large black eyes. "Friends call... Hatsuka."

Tadaka smiled. Hatsuka nezumi—mouse. "You're very brave, Mouse."

She shook her head, and her long tail switched back and forth. "Not I, Master," she said. "I am lowly."

Just then, a taller, male ratling ran up to where Tadaka and Mouse stood. His brown fur was slick with mud and the blood of his enemies. He wore a breastplate salvaged from a dead samurai. The armor almost fit. He bowed low.

"Come. Come now, Master," he said to Tadaka. "Chief dying. Wants speak with you." He bowed again, scraping the earth with his twitching whiskers.

Tadaka nodded. The taller nezumi led the Master of Earth across the bowl of the valley. Mouse followed. "Ke-o-kecha, his name," she whispered to Tadaka. "He chiefs son."

Near the wall, a ratling lay dying. The fur around his muzzle was silver with age. Long whiskers adorned his wrinkled face. He wore armor cobbled together from suits taken off dead foes. His breath rattled out in long gasps. A great wound split his chest from breastbone to belly. Though it had not been deep enough to kill the nezumi immediately, Tadaka saw at once that the wound would be fatal.

The ratling chief, Gin'nabo-rrr, gestured with one shaking paw that Tadaka should draw closer. The Master of Earth knelt by the nezumi's side.

"Domo, domo ... domo-arigato," Gin'nabo-rrr gasped. "You save my people. You ... drive off... forces of Dark Power."

"Your people saved themselves," Tadaka said. "I merely provided some timely assistance."

"... Legends say humans are—no friend. Yet, friend you are, samurai. Gin'nabo-rrr likes you."

"I am honored, great chief."

"How are you called, human?" the chief asked.

"Tadaka."

"Tadaka-sama," chief Gin'nabo-rrr said, his voice rasping, "Pack member, you are now. Always welcome with Long Tail Pack." He reached out one shaking paw and touched it to Tadaka's hand. The Master of Earth did not draw away. "Never can," Gin'nabo-rrr said, "repay debt for what you have done____"

His hand slipped from Tadaka's, and his life wheezed out. He closed his eyes.

A small band of ratlings had gathered around their chief. They hung their heads and closed their eyes. Ke-o-kecha raised his muzzle and uttered a mournful wail. Soon, others in the village took up the cry. The sound echoed off the walls of the valley and drifted into the heavens. Tadaka knelt in silence.

Finally, three ratlings came to bear the chief's body to his hut—one of the few buildings left standing after the battle. Ke-o-kecha turned to the rest of the assemblage. "Gin'nabo-rrr is gone. I am chief of the Long Tail Pack," he said. The ratlings swished their tails and rattled their weapons in assent. Several look up a growling chant, repeating Ke-o-kecha's name in low, feral voices.

Chief Ke-o-kecha turned to Tadaka. "Gin'nabo-rrr could not repay you, shugenja Tadaka-sama," he said, "but my people will make good good try. We tend your wounds. We give you food and drink. We find you whatever you wish."

"I need to be going," Tadaka said. "I have a mission to complete."

"We will help," Ke-o-kecha said, his black eyes shining. "Powerful we are here. Many generations in shadow, yet untouched. After you rest, we help." He looked at the Master

of Earth and smiled, showing his sharp teeth. "Even great great shugenja must

rest."

Tadaka nodded his head wearily. "Hai," he said.

The ratlings took the Phoenix master to one of the unburned huts. There they made him a bed of clean straw to rest in. They brought fresh water and salves to soothe his wounds. Tadaka accepted these remedies gracefully, but applied some of his own jade powders when the nezumi weren't watching. Neither the wound on his ribs nor the one on his shoulder appeared serious, but he didn't want them to become infected with the Shadow-lands taint.

His hosts offered him food as well. This he politely declined in favor of his own provisions. "I must eat my shugenja food," he explained, "to maintain my powers." Secretly, his reasons for refusing the food were less noble. These ratlings may be immune to Shadowlands' poisons, he reasoned, but I am not. Taint within the body is much more difficult to cleanse than the taint of a wound.

After eating, Tadaka rested for a bit. The ratlings stood guard outside his mud-hut sanctum. His mind wandered for a time in the land of dreams. He remembered the words of the Hooded Ronin, and the warning his father had given Ujimitsu. A familiar voice broke his reverie.

"That was a close one, eh?" said Ob.

Tadaka kept his eyes closed. "I thought you'd gone."

"Nope," the mujina replied. "Though I know enough to get lost when things become dangerous."

Tadaka opened his eyes. "I'll use you as a warning system."

"Now I wouldn't..." Ob began. Then, looking at the opening to the hut, he said, "Oh, rats!" and vanished.

Tadaka tensed, and his hand stole to the hilt of his katana on the mud floor next to him. A moment later, Mouse's muzzle appeared in the doorway. She bowed.

"Tadaka-sama, great master," she said. "Ke-o-kecha is here to see you ... if your fur shines enough now."

Tadaka nodded, took his hand from the sword, and sat up. "I'll see him, yes, thank you. I'm feeling much better. I have questions I need answered before I move on."

Mouse bowed and left. A few moments later, Ke-o-kecha entered the hut. He bowed and crouched on the floor across from the shugenja. "Your fur shines again, Tadaka-san. Have you rested?" he asked.

"Enough for now, thank you, Ke-o-kecha-san," Tadaka replied. "Those creatures, why were they attacking your people?"

"The dark ones grow strong. They kill any in their way," Ke-o-kecha said. "Long Tails leave this village soon soon and find new home."

"Why?"

"The Jun-zo builds great army in Unaru Numa—the Howling Mire. Army will ride out and destroy all, like bad ants."

"You know where to find Junzo's lair?" Tadaka asked.

Ke-o-kecha turned away, and his tail quivered. He ran his paws across the brown fur below his ears. "All that see Jun-zo die," he said. Then he sighed and added. "Long Tails know way, though. How else our tribe avoid evil place?"

Tadaka leaned forward, his eyes blazing in the room's dim light. "I intend to battle Junzo—to steal his secrets so that he can no longer hurt my people ... or yours."

"Then you are great great shugenja, or great great fool."

"Perhaps a little of both," Tadaka said. "Will one of you show me the way to Junzo's lair?"

"The Jun-zo slay us if we discovered."

"I know that. It is a very great risk for whoever goes with me, but I need to know the way. The sooner I find it, the more lives can be saved."

Ke-o-kecha nodded grimly. "Tribe in your debt, Tadaka-sama. We show you path to Evil One's warren. Though not many Long Tails remain, Ke-o-kecha will gather great raiding party to go with you."

"No," Tadaka said, shaking his head. "We must go quietly, quickly, so that Junzo doesn't suspect. Only in this way can we thwart his plans."

A toothy smile spread across Ke-o-kecha's brown muzzle. His whiskers twitched. "Quiet and quick what nezumi do best," he said.

THE WAY OF THE VOID

I know you're uncomfortable here," Seppun Ishikawa said. "I know you'd rather be with your people, but I'm glad you returned." He gave Kaede a smile as they walked beneath the cherry trees in the imperial garden. "The castle shines less brightly when you are gone."

Kaede turned away so that her friend would not see the blush on her cheeks. "Uncomfortable is too strong a word," she said. A chill wind from the sea blew in, rattling the trees' red-brown leaves. Kaede watched as the leaves leapt from their branches and danced briefly in the cool air before settling to their graves on the wilting grass. Autumn had come early this year, and winter was close behind. "I wish ..." she began, but paused and walked onward.

"Wish what?" Ishikawa asked.

Kaede sighed and looked into Ishikawa's brown eyes. Despite herself, his handsome face brought a smile to her lips. "I wish that things could be as they were," she said.

"Not a very practical wish for the Mistress of the Void," Ishikawa said. His tone was playful, but the words stung her slightly, nonetheless.

Kaede stopped and cast her gaze out, past the high cliffs and over the vast blue sea. Boats darted to and fro on the glassy surface, mirroring the seagulls circling above them; both hunted for fish. Kaede wondered where her brother Tadaka was, and what was happening to him. Her mastery of the Void usually allowed her to sense her siblings' presence. Even now she felt Tomo's comforting placidity in the back of her mind. Since Tadaka had entered the Shadowlands, though, she had felt nothing. His long absence worried her more than she would admit.

"Even the Mistress of the Void can have childish wishes," she said.

Ishikawa nodded. "Hai, we're all allowed that much."

"I wish the Scorpion had never plotted their coup," she said. "I wish they'd never sacked and burnt the white-walled city. I wish Hantei the 38th still sat upon the Emerald Throne. I wish that the throne had never been sundered."

"In days like this, it's easy to wish for such things," Ishikawa said, a touch of wistfulness in his voice. "Everything seemed much easier in the days before the coup."

She looked at him, nodded, and forced a faint smile. "Hai."

Ishikawa kicked the dirt with his foot and spat. "The empress and her ninja yojimbo are behind much of this trouble. Once a Scorpion, always a Scorpion. Are you sure you want to meet with Kachiko today?"

Kaede smiled at him. "*Want* may be too strong a word," she said. "But it is necessary. Every stone removed from a wall is one less to climb over."

"You speak of these meetings as if they were a slow siege," Ishikawa said, falling into step beside her once more.

"They are, in a way," she said. "Just as our games of ishii mimic a battle."

"I have never seen her lose," Ishikawa cautioned.

"Nor have I," Kaede replied. "But I'm playing for different stakes. I know my place. I am Mistress of the Void. Not even Kachiko can take that from me."

Ishikawa nodded, but she got the impression that he didn't completely believe her.

They came to a place in the path where the trail curved toward the late emperor's favorite lotus pond. The two of them stopped, knowing that Kachiko would be waiting for Kaede a short distance ahead.

"You're sure you don't want me to walk in with you?"

Kaede shook her head. "I hardly think Kachiko will kill me while we're sitting by the lotus pond."

"I wouldn't put it past her," Ishikawa said.

Kaede laughed. "Well, if she wanted to, I don't think you could stop her," she said. "I'll meet you tonight after the poetry reading, as planned. Will your brother be there, too?"

"I believe so, yes," Ishikawa said.

"I'll see you then," Kaede said, bowing.

Ishikawa bowed to her in return and took his leave. Kaede's eyes lingered on his rugged form and confident gait. She took a deep breath and set her foot on the path to the lotus pond.

She didn't see any guards as she walked, but that was to be expected. As the emperor became more and more ill, Kachiko assumed a greater proportion of his duties. In assigning guards, the Mistress of Scorpions reverted to her old ways. The late emperor Hantei the 38th had kept his guards in plain sight, a visual reminder of his power. The Scorpion, on the other hand, watched without being noticed, struck without being seen. Kaede suppressed a shudder.

She rounded a corner in the path and stepped into the garden surrounding the lotus pond. Beside the water sat Kachiko in a flower-patterned kimono. The robe was long and luxurious, its pleats carefully folded into pleasing arrangements. Her hair glistened, and her black eyes gleamed in the late afternoon sunlight. Seeing Kaede, she smiled—her deep red lips parted to show pearly white teeth. The empress' beauty almost took Kaede's breath away.

The Mistress of the Void bowed, turning her eyes demurely toward the ground.

"Isawa Kaede," Kachiko said, her voice like music. "How kind of you to come. I enjoy our little games."

Kaede calmed her mind and said, "As do I, Kachiko-sama."

The empress gestured around her, indicating the pool and gardens. "This place reminds me of my gardens at Kyuden Bayushi," she said. "I enjoy its serenity."

"As do I, Highness," Kaede said. She wondered, at the reference. Was Kachiko reminding her of the lost kingdom of the Scorpion, or merely of who controlled the castle and its grounds? Kaede summoned up the spirit of the Void and silenced the questioning voices inside her head.

"Sit," said Kachiko, indicating a spot on the grass next to a wooden ishii board. Kaede did so, noticing that the grass was not so green as she first had thought. Indeed, the edges were quite dry, almost sharp. Early frost had robbed it of life. The trees surrounding the lotus pond also showed the premature withering she had noticed in the rest of the gardens. Even the lily pads in the quiet pond looked dried out. Inwardly, Kaede frowned.

Kachiko held out her hands for Kaede to pick one. The Mistress of the Void reached and indicated the left. Kachiko opened her palm to reveal a smooth black stone. Kaede would be black, the emptiness of the Void. Kachiko would be white, the color of death. Kachiko smiled. She handed Kaede a tray of black stones and took the white tray for herself.

"Again, you play first, Kachiko-sama," Kaede said.

"As is only right," Kachiko replied, smiling. She placed her white stone on one of the intersections in the lower left quadrant of the board.

Kaede considered the board for a moment. Its thirty-eight lines intersecting in three hundred sixty-one points looked like a spider web, at the center of which sat the smiling Mother of Scorpions. She placed her black stone down in the corner opposite Kachiko's white one.

They proceeded, alternating turns as the board filled with playing pieces, each trying to surround and capture the other's stones. As they played, they chatted amiably.

"Does the emperor still play?" Kaede asked. "He used to when he was a child."

"He did," Kachiko said, capturing one of Kaede's pieces, "but he never much enjoyed it. It was more his father's game, I think."

"Yes," Kaede said. "Hantei the 38th and I played many games here by his lotus pond." She kept her face pleasant and neutral, but it was plain Kachiko caught the allusion to the emperor killed by Kachiko's late husband.

"I'm sure that Hantei the 38th, may he dwell forever with the Sun Goddess, would appreciate that you still play the game," Kachiko said. She smiled, and the green flecks within her eyes sparkled.

"Not so skillfully as you, I fear," Kaede said. She reached out with her mind but sensed not even a trace of Kachiko's thoughts. Inwardly, Kaede's frustration welled.

Kachiko laughed and started to move on another area of the board. "How are your brothers?" she asked.

Kaede repressed a chill. "They were well—the last time I saw them," she said. She placed a black piece on an intersection next to one of Kachiko's, trying to begin a circling maneuver.

"Was that when you went home to Kyuden Isawa?" Kachiko asked. "I had reports that all the Elemental Masters had gathered."

"As is our custom," Kaede said.

"I thought such a meeting unusual at this time of year," Kachiko said. She began a counterattack against Kaede's circling maneuver.

"Routine business," Kaede replied. "Affairs of the clan."

"Sometimes," Kachiko said, "the affairs of clan—or even the empire—must take a back seat to personal considerations. Don't you think that's so?"

"Never in my experience, Kachiko-sama, though your experience may be different from mine."

Kachiko smiled. "Was your father there?"

"If he was, I never saw him," Kaede answered, smiling back.

"Surely you must miss him," Kachiko said. "To lose someone so close is a great burden."

"He is not lost," Kaede said, feeling the hairs on the back of her neck rise. "He merely answers a different call than most."

"You think the Phoenix can count on his aid then, if such were ever needed?"

"I'm sure of it," Kaede said. "The ties of blood run deep."

"Yes," Kachiko said, "they do." In the Mother of Scorpion's eyes floated the ghost of Dairu, her dead son.

Kaede captured three pieces on the board and said, "Would that those ties ran so deep in Yogo Junzo."

Kachiko stopped in midmove, for only a second. She placed her piece down, but placed it badly. Kaede spotted the error.

"Though the name of Scorpion is banned, Junzo is a disgrace to it, nonetheless," Kachiko said.

Kaede nodded, keeping her eyes carefully on the empress. "Hai. You must be as ashamed of his actions as the Crane are of Hoturi's."

"More ashamed, I think," Kachiko said quickly. "Junzo never before set his personal ambitions above those of his clan."

"And you think Hoturi did?"

Kachiko's black eyes flashed. "I *know* it," she said, and then added, "all the court knows it."

"Is it true Hoturi's wife left him?" Kaede asked.

"I haven't inquired," Kachiko said. "It seems such a small point considering the state of things."

Kaede nodded. "Hai. Sometimes such small elements form a larger picture, though." She saw a weakness in Kachiko's defense on the board and wondered whether to exploit it.

"Of course," Kachiko said. "But sometimes, small elements are just that, and nothing more."

"When he was researching at our library, I once heard Junzo remark that 'One small stone can start a landslide.' I wonder if he's cast such stones in our midst."

"If he has, he's likely to be buried by a rockslide of his own creation," Kachiko said.

"Only if the rest of us discover his weaknesses and act against him," Kaede said.

"Junzo's weakness is his ego—his overwhelming pride in his own abilities," Kachiko said. "That hubris will destroy him eventually, even if the other clans slaughter each other and he rides across the mountains unopposed." A cold fire descended on the Mother of Scorpion's eyes. She smiled as if with some inward satisfaction.

"I pray to the Fortunes you are right, Kachiko-sama," Kaede said. "I pray Junzo never leaves the dark lands. Though I pray, as well, that the other clans will cease their senseless bloodshed."

"Spoken like a Phoenix," Kachiko said, smiling. She placed another white stone on the board, still apparently oblivious to the weakness in her defense.

Kaede considered a moment. She let the Void fill her. Still, she sensed nothing where the empress sat. Could Kachiko be so soulless? "I pass," Kaede said.

Kachiko, distracted for a moment, looked back at her opponent, surprised. "Oh," she said. "I pass as well. Our game is over, it seems."

"By my count, you have won, Empress," Kaede said. She bowed, nearly touching her head to the grass.

"Domo arigato, Kaede-san," Kachiko said. "A good game. Perhaps we can play again tomorrow."

"Perhaps," Kaede said. "If you wish."

Kachiko nodded. "You may go," she said. She produced a fan from the sleeve of her robe and waved it. Kaede noticed that the fan featured a subtle Scorpion design.

The Mistress of the Void rose and walked toward the palace. She stretched out with her senses as she went and perceived a shadowy figure moving through the trees to Kachiko's left. She didn't have to glance back to know that it was Aramoro, Kachiko's Scorpion brother-in-law.

Kaede set course for the baths. Somehow her meetings with Kachiko always left her feeling unclean. A noise caught her attention as she walked. Hammers. The endless echoing of hammers filled the great halls and spilled out into the afternoon air.

No matter how many hours the laborers worked, the damage done to the castle seemed irreparable. And was it Kaede's imagination, or did the plaster walls seem less white than they had just the day before?

As she entered the bathhouse, Kaede wondered if the empire, like the castle, was crumbling from within.

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Hours later, after her bath and following a poetry reading by Kakita Yoshi, Kaede crested the final short stairway and emerged atop one of the palace's open-air towers.

Ishikawa went with her. There, the two of them found his brother, Kiaku, waiting for them. The autumn stars blazed brightly in the sky overhead. The night was calm. Not even a sea breeze brushed their hair. Far below, they still heard the echoes of hammers working late into the night.

The three of them sat cross-legged in a circle around the trapdoor. Kiaku produced a jar of sake and three cups. He poured some for each, raised his glass, and said, "To friends, well met."

Kaede and Ishikawa nodded to the toast, and the three of them drank. They gazed silently at the stars for a time, each contemplating a favorite constellation. For Kaede, it was the Phoenix—though some part deep inside her tugged her eyes to the Lion as well. She wondered at the fate of her former fiancé, the ronin Toturi.

Turning to Kiaku, she said, "Kiaku, you've been traveling lately. Do you have any news of Toturi?"

Kiaku glanced nervously at his brother, who gazed uncomfortably back.

"I know," Kaede said, "that we're not to speak his name within the palace—or anywhere else. Something inside me, though, compels me to ask. Is there news? Has he been hurt?"

"No, not hurt, Kaede-san," Kiaku said. "Not so far as I know, anyway. He fights valiantly against the forces of the Evil One, though he is vastly outnumbered. If only some great clan would give him aid. ..." He stopped, remembering Kaede's position. "I'm sorry, my lady. I spoke out of turn." He took another drink.

"Toturi's ronin status has cost him dearly, Kaede-san," Ishikawa said. His warm breath gathered above his head in a small white cloud. "Hoturi's dark army presses his former Crane kinsman to the brink of extinction. It's all the Black Lion can do to hold Junzo's forces in check. Toturi's former clan won't help him. And who can blame them?"

"The Lion are pawns of the emperor," Kiaku said impatiently, "and the emperor is the pawn of ..." He stopped and his eyes wandered to the castle below.

"Yes, I know," Kaede said. "I can't believe that even Kachiko, for all the hatred in her heart, would let the empire fall to Junzo, though."

"Who knows what's truly in a Scorpion's heart?" said Ishikawa.

Kiaku shook his head and took another drink. He exhaled and watched the cloud of breath drift into the heavens.

"Who knows? Not I—even though I serve her celestial husband. The only heart I comprehend is Toturi's."

"What do you mean, Kiaku?" Kaede asked.

"Just that his is a cause I can understand. The Crab have fought the darkness so long that the two are almost indistinguishable. The Crane have turned on themselves like rabid wolves. The Lion tight for honor—but have forgotten whose honor they fight for. The Dragon sit in their stronghold, invulnerable and oblivious. The Unicorn stop to pick up every stray cur they see. The Mantis are ronin sell-swords, who could trust them? And the Phoenix ..." Here Kiaku remembered himself again, and stopped.

"What about the Phoenix?" Kaede prodded.

Kiaku looked from Kaede to his brother and back again. He folded his arms across his chest. "I'd rather not say."

Kaede turned her gaze to her friend. "Ishikawa . . . ?" she asked. Her breath ringed her head like a pale halo.

Ishikawa squirmed where he sat. Then, screwing up his courage, he said, "Kiaku feels as I do—the Phoenix are far too isolated, my lady. If your clan would intervene ..."

"We have sent our army to fight against Hoturi," Kaede said.

"Only a small part of your army," Kiaku said anxiously. "Tsukune is a good leader, but she's young. And I've heard that she and Hoturi have a past together."

Kaede's cheeks reddened. She called up her inner calm and said. "They were friends growing up, that's true. We thought perhaps she could turn aside his wrath."

"Hoturi is a mad dog," Ishikawa said. "Only death will turn him aside now—his death, or that of his people." He took another drink.

"Ujimitsu is with our army, when his duties allow," Kaede said. Despite her discipline, pressure built within her chest.

"Kaede-san," Ishikawa said, "it is not enough. Your people must step in. You have the power. You should use it."

Kaede rose, feeling anger and sorrow both welling up inside. "You do not know the burden, the responsibilities of our power," she said. "We walk paths others cannot tread, do work others may never know! Who are you to judge us?"

Ishikawa stood, holding out his hands. "Kaede, I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me."

They looked at each other, emotions burning on their faces. The blackness of night surrounded them. The stars blazed uncaringly in the sky. Kiaku sat quietly, wise enough not to intervene.

Finally, Kaede turned her eyes down and said, "I, too, am sorry."

Ishikawa stepped forward as if to embrace her, but stopped short. "It's this damn plague," he said, "this damn war. We're all standing on razors."

"Hai," Kaede said. Tears budded on the corners of her eyes; she willed them away. "We are all of us birds, trapped in cages of our own design," she said. She sat down once more. Ishikawa did the same.

The three of them sat silently for a time, sipping sake and watching the stars spin.

Finally, Kiaku said. "Toturi isn't caged."

"But he is *ronin*," said Ishikawa.

"If he is, perhaps all of us should be ronin," Kiaku replied. "My term of service is up. Nothing holds me here. I will leave the imperial household and join the Black Lion. Come with me— both of you. I know Toturi would find a place for us in his army."

Kaede shook her head. "I have duties, both to my clan and to the emperor," she said. "I cannot leave."

Ishikawa looked from his brother to Kaede and back again.

"I, too, have duties that keep me here," he said.

They sat silently and drank until the jar of sake was gone. Then they went quietly down into the castle and returned to their quarters. The cloud of their words lingered in the air atop the tower until an ocean breeze carried the ghost of the conversation away.

THE PATH OF EVIL

In the end, Ke-o-kecha sent three ratlings to guide the Master of Earth. Tadaka would have preferred fewer, but three was a sacred number to the nezumi, and so the Phoenix shugenja gracefully deferred to his host's superstition.

Mouse was one of the guides. Ke-o-kecha praised her knowledge of the lands and cleverness in avoiding the

minions of the enemy. With her came Kra'no'krree—called Krree—a warrior nezumi with a battle-scarred muzzle and a strong sword arm. The third of their group was Chihu, a young, likable ratling who enjoyed the sound of his own voice. All were dressed for travel and had pouches of supplies hanging from their thin obi. Long tanto daggers hung at their belts next to the pouches, and each of the nezumi wore a few battered pieces of armor. Krree carried a small, round shield.

Tadaka scratched the stubble growing on his chin and adjusted his round hat on his head. He'd resecured the stone he took from

the brim, and the rocks rattled gently as he made ready to leave the ratling encampment. His wounds still burned slightly, but he chanted a sutra to banish thoughts of them from his mind.

His ratling guides milled about nervously as the village turned out to see the group off.

"Good good hunting, Tadaka-sama," Ke-o-kecha said. "May your fur shine even when you are old old and your tail hair falls out." He bowed to the Phoenix shugenja.

"May your whiskers always be subtle," Tadaka said, bowing in return.

The ratling chief turned from his guest to the guides. "Honor of our pack is yours," he said to them. "Guide Tadaka-sama as you would your brother."

Mouse, Krree, and Chihu bowed and raised their tails in reverence to their leader. They touched their whiskers to the ground three times.

Tadaka walked between the tall boulders and out of the bowl valley. The three nezumi followed. Their pack members cheered and thumped their tails in approval.

The land sank quickly as the four of them left the encampment. Soon they were surrounded by the gloom of the Shadow-lands. Mouse walked next to Tadaka, as she knew the way best.

"Mouse good at staying out of trouble," Chihu said, "but only after making trouble first." He laughed.

Mouse scowled at him. "If your tongue were sword, Chihu," she said, "you could slay Evil One from here."

Both Krree and Chihu laughed at her rejoinder, and even Tadaka cracked a smile.

"Is Junzo's lair far?" the Master of Earth asked.

"Three walks and two sleeps," Mouse said. "Last walk is short short. Maybe not past lunch."

"That four walks and three sleeps for rest of pack," Krree said. "Mouse walks quick."

"Walk fast because much practice fleeing," Chihu said. He smiled at her, showing his prominent front teeth. She growled and stuck out her tongue in reply.

"When I accidentally almost find dark place," Chihu added with a grin, "it take *me five* walks,"

"And the Howling Mire you spoke of?" Tadaka asked.

"Reach Unaru Numa after lunch after first sleep," Krree said. "Kra'no'krree has hunted many times along swamp edge."

"But not dare go further, Chihu guess," said Chihu.

"Chihu talk brave, but always hide when trouble comes," Mouse said. Chihu stuck out his tongue at her. She laughed.

The land they walked through was irregular, pitted with gullies and craters, and dotted with standing boulders. Some of the rocks reminded Tadaka of sacrificial stones. Dark stains that might have been blood ran down the sides of the rocks.

Less and less now he saw the kind of wholesome stone he'd found in the ratlings' village. These new rocks were black and shot through with iridescent yellow-green veins—the taint of the Shadowlands. Tadaka felt the pure earth slipping ever deeper beneath his feet. Soon it would be consumed

entirely by the evil influence of this place. When that happened, Tadaka's powers would be lessened. The Master of Earth had come prepared to fight on his own.

The nezumi chattered as they walked, nipping at each other. Tadaka realized all three were scared, even the hunter Krree. Squabbling was a way to keep up their courage. The Master of Earth said nothing to them about it. The nezumi would know when to fall silent.

They saw no game as they traveled, and only a few small creatures—twisted animals infected with taint. The ratlings threw stones to scare the creatures off. After a time, Mouse and the others grew less boisterous in their chatter.

Before sleep on the first day, they came to a waterfall that ran backward. The noise of its deluge was like a great hissing snake. Its black waters emanated from a wide, bubbling pool. They cascaded upward from the tainted earth into the gray sky. The waterfall's top remained hidden in the mists. Its dark liquid stank of decay and corruption.

Krree and Mouse avoided the water, but Chihu ventured to the edge of the pool. He tossed a charred stick into the liquid. It was sucked into the torrent and sailed up into the air. He wanted to experiment further, but Tadaka insisted they move on.

Always, the Shadowlands fog glowed around them. They had no day or night to judge by, so they walked until they were tired.

They traveled a good distance from the cursed waterfall before making camp to sleep.

The ratlings set guards, but Tadaka merely crossed his legs and slipped into meditation. He left enough of his consciousness behind that he could react quickly to any danger. Fortunately, the sleep time passed uneventfully.

After they woke, they crossed into a land of smooth, curving rocks—like a wide frozen river. The surface of the rocks was slippery, and the small band picked their way across it with care. At one point Tadaka rounded a corner and found himself staring up at the rest of his party. The ratlings blinked and rubbed their eyes when they spotted the Master of Earth rooted to the overhang above their heads. It took a while before he could convince the skittish nezumi to round the corner and join him.

The laws of nature do not apply in this cursed land, Tadaka thought to himself. There is no night or day, no up or down. The only distinction is between good and evil—and even that dims the farther we travel.

Eventually the sloping stones gave way to a dry, cracked plain dotted with diseased plants. Deformed insects poked their heads from the cracks in the earth, only to scuttle away.

Gradually a new sound came to Tadaka's ears, like the wailing of the wind, but the Master of Earth felt no breeze. The sound became clearer when they stopped to eat. The nezumi broke out their water jugs and some dried meat and vegetables. Tadaka stuck to his own provisions: water from jade vials, dry seaweed, some nuts and dried fruit.

As they ate, he looked at the jade amulet that hung around his neck. Already veins of darkness crept into the green stone's round surface. The evil of the Shadowlands was

powerful here. He hoped he'd brought enough jade to ensure safe passage in and out of the dark kingdom.

The mournful sound caught his ears again. Turning to Mouse, he asked, "What's that noise?"

"Howling Mire," Mouse said. A shiver ran down her tail.

"What makes the sound?" he asked.

"Wailing demons," Mouse said. She closed her black eyes, bit her lower lip, and hugged herself.

"Lowlies think that," Krree said. "Mire has demons, but noise is only an evil wind, Kra'no'krree think." He spat a bit of tough vegetable out onto the ground.

"Krree just boasting," Chihu said, "has never felt this wind on his fur."

"Kra'no'krree seen inside mire," Krree said, somewhat annoyed. He bared his front teeth intimidatingly at Chihu.

"Iust not far far," Chihu added, ignoring the threat. He gnawed the last bit of meat off the bone he'd been chewing, i racked it with his teeth, and sucked out the marrow.

Krree frowned. "Some day," he said, "Chihu's courage will be tested. Then we see how brave *Chihu* is."

"Hope courage will not be tested until wedding day," Chihu said, "understand *those* dangers." He grinned broadly, showing all his teeth. The other nezumi only smiled weakly in return. The strangeness of the Shadowlands had begun to weigh down their spirits.

Soon, the four companions resumed their journey.

In the Master of Earth's soul, the call of the earth lessened, livil gradually overwhelmed it. At the center of that evil sat Yogo Junzo, and beyond Junzo lay his undead master. They were traveling in the right direction.

The plants they passed became more stunted and flabby as they approached the mire. Long whitish tendrils, some as thick as tree branches, covered the earth.

One of these tendrils snared Mouse's leg. Tadaka hacked the root off quickly, but the encounter left the ratling girl shaken.

They came suddenly upon the edge of the mire. Chihu put his foot out and discovered that the earth beneath his paw was no longer solid. He squealed as the mire sucked at his shin, threatening to pull him under. Tadaka and Krree grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him out.

Chihu sat on the solid ground at the mire's edge and panted. "Enough courage test, Chihu think."

Tadaka looked at his three companions. The ratlings tried to hide their fear. They were a proud, brave people. Their courage impressed the Master of Earth. "I don't need all of you to go with me," Tadaka said, "just one. The rest of you can go back to your tribe. It will not be a stain upon your honor. I thank you for taking me this far."

"Give our word to Ke-o-kecha," Krree said. "We all go with you."

"Besides," Chihu added, "three luckier than one." He said it bravely, but his voice trembled.

Though still shaking, Mouse nodded her head.

"Very well," said Tadaka. "But you may leave at any time, so long as one remains to guide me to Junzo's lair."

The ratlings nodded their heads and bowed slightly. They were with him on this road to Jigoku until they achieved their objective or death took them. The Master of Earth calmed his mind and drew strength from one of the untainted stones concealed within his sleeve.

He peered into the iridescent fog of the Howling Mire. Titan shapes loomed in the gray darkness—great Shadowlands trees, gnarled and twisted by the swamp's black waters. The branches bore no leaves, though some hung with vines or tendrils.

Patches of earth dotted the mire, rotting soil covered with fungus and spiny plants. In some places, the ground appeared solid, but such a spot had nearly claimed Chihu. They couldn't trust anything on looks alone. Nothing in the Shadowlands was what it appeared to be.

A low, distant wailing, like the cries of dying men, suffused the air.

"Is there no path around the bog?" Tadaka asked Mouse.

"No," Mouse answered. "This only track. Careful careful. Many dangers."

"Do you know the way?" the Master of Earth asked.

She nodded. "Walking slow, though."

"Slow slow, if stand and talk," said Krree.

"Could make boat," suggested Chihu. He shaded his black eyes with one long hand and cast his gaze to the mire's tall trees. He frowned and wiggled his whiskers.

"Tree juice deadly," Mouse said. "Saw lobuck rub antlers on one. Fell down dead. Mouse won't cut bad trees."

"Danger danger in water, too, Kra'no'krree guesses," Krree added.

"Then we'll pick our way through," Tadaka said. He looked at Mouse.

The young lady ratling shivered. She scanned the perimeter. Finding a likely place, she led Tadaka and her fellows into the Unaru Numa.

They traveled from one stand of vegetation to another. Thistle moss stung the nezumi's toes, but they wrapped cloths around their feet and continued bravely onward. On the bough of a great fallen tree, the group took supper. They'd seen some small animals earlier during their hike but saw none now. The swamp was drained of life. The only sound was the mire's omnipresent mournful wailing.

When supper was finished, Tadaka led the nezumi toward the next sward of sickly vegetation. He'd just reached the shore when suddenly the log shook. The ratlings tottered, throwing their arms wide and using their tails for balance.

On the mossy ground at the trunk's end, Tadaka looked back. He turned in time to see a huge shape emerge from the mire. It surfaced like a breaching whale, thrusting tons of mud and black water aside. The swamp's stagnant air howled at the monster's arrival.

The creature's great jaws gaped wide, half again as tall as a man. Mouse, Chihu, and Krree screamed. Before Tadaka could do anything, the jaws snapped shut. The great log splintered as the creature took a huge bite. Along with the wood went Krree.

Mouse and Chihu scampered off the log.

Tadaka reached into his sleeve and threw a stone. He spoke a word of power. The stone grew as large as a boulder.

The creature dived back into the mire. The monster sank in a roil of bubbles and vanished from sight, taking Krree with it. The last Tadaka and the others saw of their friend was his tail, protruding from the muck monster's mouth.

Tadaka's boulder splashed harmlessly into the swamp.

Mouse wailed piteously and started to cry; Chihu gibbered incoherently. Tadaka forced them back, away from the water, putting his own body between the nezumi and the menace. He scanned the mire's surface with his keen eyes, but saw only ebony water. Eventually, the mire's howl died down, and the bubbles subsided.

"I'm sorry," Tadaka finally said.

"It eat him! It eat him!" Chihu babbled. He picked up a stone and threw it defiantly at the water.

"We should move," Tadaka said, "in case the creature comes back. I doubt this small, wet island would be much protection."

That roused the nezumi. The trio quickly picked their way off the small stand and away from the ruined tree trunk. As they

walked, over broken lands and through waist-deep waters, the eerie sound of the mire grew steadily louder.

They should have stopped to rest, but after Krree's accident, none of them wanted to. Tadaka kept his senses open, determined not to be caught off guard again. Mouse maintained a steady direction through the tangled gloom.

After a time, Chihu turned to Mouse and asked, "Why you know this place deep deep in mire? Rest of pack do not."

"Gin'nabo-rrr did, " Mouse said quietly, "before he killed by dark ones. Mouse follow him couple times. Once, got lost. Monster chase far far into mire. When stopped running, had reached solid ground. Saw fortress of dark ones." Her tail shook with the thought. She paused before continuing quietly, "Took many walks and many sleeps to find home again."

Chihu and Tadaka nodded. The trees in the swamp grew so thick the trio had to climb between the trunks to pass. Tadaka found a place for them to rest in a cleft above the muck. They sheltered and slept awhile.

When they resumed their journey, the gnarled trees became shorter. The blighted wood thinned out, and the companions walked in the mud. Tadaka and the nezumi found some fallen branches stripped of bark and denuded of poison. They cut the branches into staffs and probed the waters in front of them. Always they watched and listened for bubbles and other signs of monsters. All they heard, though, was the mire's eerie dirge. The companions saw strange fauna, including a rabbitlike creature with feet shaped like small canoes. No animals threatened them, though.

By lunchtime, Tadaka and his guides reached a spot where the great trees vanished completely. Before the travelers stretched a vast pool, dotted with tree stumps. The wailing was almost unbearable here, filling the fog-shrouded air with a numbing drone. All three covered their ears.

"Almost there," Mouse said, gasping for breath in the moist atmosphere. Her fur shivered, and her whiskers trembled. "Beyond waste lies fortress of Evil One."

Tadaka nodded. "Yosh." He peered into the gloom.

What at first had looked like tree stumps were actually some kind of flora—short and squat, with long broad roots and no apparent leaves. A hole gaped in the side of each plant. The howling noise emanated from the holes. It sounded like the wail of restless spirits.

"You scent that?" Chihu asked loudly above the howling.

Tadaka detected a faint, cloying sweetness in the torpid air. "Smells like honey."

Chihu nodded. "Think there is honey in stumps?"

"If there is," Tadaka said, "it's unfit to eat. We should move along." He walked forward, probing with his stick. The ratlings followed. The stagnant water was knee-deep and seemed free of sudden drop-offs.

"Did Mouse sniff smell here before?" Chihu asked.

The female nezumi shook her head and laid her ears back. "No," she said. "Just wanted get home."

"Wouldn't hurt to look," Chihu said thoughtfully. "If find honey, we have treat." Before Tadaka could stop him, he walked to one of the stumps and stuck his nose near the hole.

As his whiskers brushed the surface of the plant, the maw in the side suddenly snapped shut with violent force. Chihu jumped back. The wailing from the stump grew louder.

"Are you all right?" Tadaka asked.

Chihu put his hands on his black nose and wiggled his snout. " Nothing missing, Chihu think."

"You were lucky," Tadaka said. "Don't do anything like that again. I thought after Krree you would be more careful."

Chihu nodded and hung his head. He joined the shugenja and Mouse, plodding listlessly behind them.

They passed deep into the swamp of stumps. The plants grew taller and broader as they went. Eventually, the roots choked off the brackish water of the mire. The huge tendrils wound themselves into a tangle, like a vast woven basket. As the stumps grew taller, their maws got wide enough to swallow a ratling—or a man. The noise grew louder in proportion to the stumps' height.

Just as it seemed the travelers could stand the clamor no longer, the plants suddenly gave way to a rocky slope. The stone was mostly black. Putrescent green veins ran through it, but still the companions were glad of its dryness. They scrambled up the slope, found a flat spot, and paused to rest.

They ate briefly, and Tadaka took the time to meditate. He hardly felt the good earth now, so deep was it buried. His heart shrank at the remoteness of pure stone.

While the Phoenix shugenja rested and Mouse cleaned her matted fur, Chihu walked back down the slope, near to the stump forest. He was careful to stay well away from the black waters, even the small pools between the roots.

"Take that, screaming demons!" he yelled, waving his hands in the air. "We make it through! Song didn't drive nezumi mad. Clever pack avoid teeth of biting stumps!"

He capered up and down, inventing a festive dance. He turned and wagged his tail disapprovingly at the stump forest.

Hearing the commotion, Tadaka opened his eyes and stood up. "Chihu! Stop being foolish! Get away from there!" He fixed his stern gaze on the young ratling.

Chihu shrugged his shoulders and stopped his dance. He scrambled up the slope again. Stooping, he picked a black stone from the slope. He turned and flung it with all his might at the largest of the stump trees. The stone sailed through the air and into the great plant's gaping maw. The hole snapped shut, only to open again a moment later.

"Eat that!" Chihu cried triumphantly.

The howling from the tree grew louder. The thick scent of honey filled the air.

Chihu turned and started to climb the slope once more.

Mouse screamed. "Chihu, look *look*."

Chihu spun so quickly that he nearly toppled off the rock.

A great glowing cloud belched forth from the maw of the stump. At first the cloud appeared to be greenish smoke. Then it resolved itself into hundreds of floating shapes.

The creatures looked like iridescent jellyfish, with transparent bodies filled with pallid green and purple innards. Long, whiplike tentacles trailed each bloated, undulating body. Some were as small as a fist. Others were as large as a man's head. The translucent jellies jetted through the air like squid swimming through water. They flew together in a great school, wailing hideously.

The swarm whirled aimlessly for a moment. Then it turned and angled straight toward the companions.

Tadaka reached out with his spirit, commanding the stone around them to form a barrier against the blighted hoard. His mind sought control, looked for sympathy, but found none. The black rock of the Shadowlands resisted the Master of Earth's power.

Mouse screamed as the howling, multiarmed blobs dived on them.

THE SWORD OF THE PHOENIX

chiba Ujimitsu leapt from the rocks and onto the ogre's back. The Shintao priestesses screamed as they saw him, not understanding that their salvation was at hand.

Ujimitsu plunged his wakizashi into the nape of the ogre's neck, burying the short sword almost to the hilt. The giant's hard vertebrae turned the blade aside. Instead of severing the monster's spine, Ujimitsu had merely angered the brute.

The ogre roared and flexed its mighty muscles, shrugging Ujimitsu from its back as if he were a fly. The wakizashi stuck. The monster whirled, and Ujimitsu ducked under its giant fist. The punch splintered a small tree behind the Phoenix Champion, and Ujimitsu leapt away.

A thousand ancestors clamored in Ujimitsu's head, each offering advice on how to slay the monster. Ujimitsu fought the noise down just in time to avoid a follow-up blow. He drew

his katana and slashed it across the ogre's knuckles. It howled in pain.

Ujimitsu jumped back to give himself time to breathe.

The priestesses whom the ogre had attacked fled pell-mell down the mountain trail. Past the cliff, they darted into the tall trees, heading directly toward the monastery.

The Phoenix Champion smiled. He had bought their escape.

The ogre recovered a club it had dropped earlier. It bellowed defiance and came at the flame-clad samurai. The ogre swung.

Ujimitsu ducked aside, his gold and red kimono flapping. He aimed a cut at the giant's midsection. His sword drew blood before the ogre's club slapped the blade away.

One of the voices whispered an idea to Ujimitsu. He nodded. As the ogre charged, Ujimitsu leapt high, over its head. The ogre tried to grab him but missed. As he jumped, the Phoenix Champion raked his blade across the monster's eyes. The katana creased the monster's brow, just above the

nose. Blood spurted in crimson gouts. The ogre roared in pain. Ujimitsu landed lightly on his feet behind the monster.

"Ho, beast!" he called defiantly. "You can't be very tough if you're having trouble with a little fellow like me!"

The ogre turned at the sound. It tried to blink the blood out of its eyes, but couldn't. Waving its club wildly, it charged at the sound of Ujimitsu's voice.

At the last second, the Phoenix Champion ducked under the club and between the ogre's legs. He slashed his katana across the ogre's hamstrings; the monster's knees buckled. Ujimitsu put his sandal to the ogre's backside and pushed.

The brute fell, screaming, over the cliff. It struck several trees on its way down, sending splinters and pine needles into the air. The ogre didn't stop until it reached the rocks ten stories below. Sharp boulders dashed out the monster's brains.

Ujimitsu stood atop the cliff, sweating. His breath came in short but satisfied gasps. He wiped his brow and gazed down the cliff, where the ogre's body lay like a broken doll. Bemusedly, he wondered how long it would take to recover his wakizashi.

Ujimitsu didn't have much time to rest. Time and space blurred for the Phoenix Champion; he seemed to be needed

everywhere at once. He entered the "Way of the Warrior."

He ran into battle, day into night, week into week. He ate when he could, slept less often, and almost never stopped moving. He exhausted many horses, but Shiba Ujimitsu himself never tired. He had been born to this job.

The battle fog lifted, and he found Tsukune in Asahina lands. Her troops stood between Hoturi's undead army and a river. The water was too deep and swift for the horses—even a strong swimmer would have trouble surviving the raging cascade.

Ujimitsu saw all this from a mountaintop nearby. The spirit of his ancestors had whispered to him, leading him here—to this moment in time. A cold waterfall rushed beside him, falling over snow-dappled mountains into a deep pool. The pool turned into the ice-rimmed river that hemmed in Tsukune.

The Phoenix Champion inhaled deeply and dived, riding the waterfall down. He plunged beneath the surface of the pool, cold tugging at his limbs. He surfaced, gulped air, and swam downstream.

Shiba Tsukune barked orders to her samurai. They formed a wall of spears between the body of their force and the advancing Shadowlands warriors. Black arrows flew from enemy bows. Several struck Tsukune's mount, and it fell, taking her down with it. The Phoenix general cursed her luck with horses.

The Shadowlands force charged. Phoenix spears pierced their pale bodies, but they kept coming. Death was no deterrent for the army of Doji Hoturi.

Pulling herself from under her horse, Tsukune heard the screams of her dying comrades. She struggled to her feet and winced. Her left ankle was sprained. "Form up! Form up!" she yelled to her samurai. "Ganbari masu! Don't give up!"

Sweat dripped into her eyes, but she blinked it back. Her army regrouped and forced the undead to retreat. Then she saw something that shot a chill through her heart.

An undead maho worker, a blood-shugenja, appeared in the back of Hoturi's forces. He was tall and skeletal, dressed in an ebony kimono covered with skull designs. Chanting, he drew forth a black vial from beneath his robes. Tsukune started to yell a warning, but her words came too late. The shugenja tossed the vial into the front line of her troops. The glass burst into a green-black cloud that crackled like bones breaking.

The samurai caught in the cloud screamed. First their skin and then their bones melted. When the cloud settled, nothing remained except armor filled with red ooze.

The maho worker laughed.

The undead army charged forward, pressing into the gap made by the terrible vial.

"Retreat! Retreat!" Tsukune called. "Abandon the horses! Take to the river!" The orders were futile. In the frigid river, they'd surely be slaughtered by the enemy's archers. Tsukune's own archers had been slain.

The maho worker drew another black vial from his kimono. He held it high above his head, chanting.

Suddenly, an arrow whizzed over Tsukune's head. It flashed through the air and struck the vial in the shugenja's hand. The vial exploded in a green-black cloud. Inside the cloud, the maho worker screamed.

The undead warriors beside him didn't have a chance to make a sound. They perished in the cloud's acid breath.

Within the cloud, something clattered to the ground. A flash of lightning followed, ripping through the undead line. Something within the shugenja's robes must have shattered. The bones of the undead exploded where the lightning touched them.

Thrilled at the turn of battle, Tsukune glanced back to see where the fortuitous arrow had come from.

Standing on a wide rock, in the middle of the rushing river, stood Shiba Ujimitsu. He was dripping from head to foot, but somehow his bow looked dry. He slung the bow on his back, drew his katana, and cried, "For the Phoenix!"

He leapt from stone to ice-slick stone, running toward the battle, his gait never faltering.

A great roar went up from the Phoenix forces. Tsukune raised her sword high. "For Shiba and our ancestors!"

Turning, she led her people back into the fray. Devastated by their own magics, the undead forces quickly fell before the flashing swords of the Phoenix samurai. When no unliving thing

moved on the field of battle, Tsukune looked at the Phoenix Champion and smiled.

"Once again, I owe you my life," she said, a lock of black hair dangling across her flashing eyes.

He smiled back. "Your life is precious to our clan—and to me."

She nodded, fighting back a blush. "Tell me, how is it that you always arrive at precisely the right moment?"

"Would you prefer that I arrived too late?" he asked. "Chalk it up to experience and good advice."

"I don't suppose you're staying long enough to share some sake," she said.

He shook his head. "I'm needed elsewhere. Promise me one thing, though."

"Yes?"

"Next time you ride off from your main force, take more shugenja or send better scouts. This little excursion could have gotten you killed."

"I'll remember," she said.

He turned to go.

"Ujimitsu," she called.

"Yes," he said, stopping at the ice-crusted riverside.

She bowed. "Sumimasen. Domo arigato gozaimasu."

Ujimitsu smiled. "You're very welcome," he said. Turning, he dived into the frigid river once more.

Again, time blurred. On his way home, Ujimitsu rescued a geisha trapped by bandits. He thwarted three kappa that were extorting money from religious pilgrims. A poet wrote a song about how the Phoenix Champion had driven fifteen goblins from the local woods.

These were the exceptions—pleasant diversions in the champion's endless war. Most of the time, Ujimitsu battled the forces of Junzo and Fu Leng. Distressingly, he met them more and more often.

Late one afternoon, he found himself on the edges of Mori Isawa, the sacred wood of his homeland. The setting sun dappled the wood in orange and deep blue. The champion had traveled long and fought hard, slaying zombies in the forest. He needed rest. Even the voices in his head had fallen silent.

Ujimitsu discovered a fallen log by the path. He brushed a dusting of snow off it and sat down. He closed his eyes and ran his hands up his face, smoothing back his long black hair. He listened to the sound of his own breath and tried to relax. How long had it been since he slept? He didn't know.

The log sank slightly, as though someone sat down next to him.

Ujimitsu opened his eyes and was shocked to see a samurai dressed in his own clothes and gazing back with his own eyes. To all appearances, the figure on the log with him was Shiba Ujimitsu.

"Are you real?" the Phoenix Champion asked.

"Are *you*?" the other Ujimitsu reflected.

"I've been in battle so long," he said, "I no longer know."

"The Way of the Warrior is not an easy one," his double replied. "Your life—my life—has not been an easy one."

"There have been times," Ujimitsu said. "Good times."

The figure beside him nodded. "And bad times as well. The seppuku of your wife, the ... death of your daughter."

"A long time ago now."

"Yes. A very long time. Do you regret it?"

"The deaths?" Ujimitsu said, annoyed. "Of course I do."

"No. Not that. Becoming champion."

Ujimitsu shook his head. "No. I don't regret that. Never. Not that I had any choice."

"But if you *had* a choice, would you do what you have done?"

The Phoenix Champion took a long, deep breath. "Yes."

The double nodded. "I thought that's what you'd say. I would say the same." He stretched and put his hands behind his head. "Some day," he said, "all Phoenix lands will be as peaceful as this."

"I live for that day," Ujimitsu replied.

The double leaned forward, put his hands on his knees, and looked at his twin. "You may *die* for it, too."

Ujimitsu nodded. "Hai, I know. Better I should die than our clan—or the empire."

"The empire's not what it was, you know," the double said. He picked up a rock and threw it into the forest.

"Even so," Ujimitsu said, "I serve it, as I do the Phoenix. Would you do differently?"

His double smiled and shook his head. "No," he said. "How could I? I'm you."

"We're not going to wrestle for control of my soul or my body, then?" Ujimitsu asked.

"No. Thank the Fortunes. I'm far too tired for that."

"As am I," said Ujimitsu. He rested his head in his hands, closed his eyes, and listened to the breeze rustling the pine boughs. "I wish this would last forever."

"It won't, you know," said the double. "It can't."

"I know that," Ujimitsu said. "I just wish it could. Sometimes I think the battles will never end."

"They will," his double said. "The end is coming."

"Soon?" Ujimitsu asked, his mind wandering among the trees.

"Very soon. Too soon. You must prepare yourself. There are dark days ahead for the Phoenix. You will have to fight harder than ever before."

"What about you?" Ujimitsu asked. He still had his eyes closed, but in his mind he saw the battles of a thousand years.

"I'll do the same, of course," the double said.

"Of course. What do we do next?"

Ujimitsu's double didn't reply.

The Phoenix Champion opened his eyes and found that he sat alone on the log. He sighed.

Then he stood and adjusted the swords hanging from his hip. Time to move on. The champion had more battles to fight and precious little time to fight them.

THE IRON FORTRESS

The jellyfish swarm fell on Chihu like a pestilent wave. The ratling screamed and waved his hands, trying to ward them off. It did him no good. They surrounded him with their long tentacles and wrapped him tight. Chihu fell, twitching, to the ground as the hideous blobs covered his body.

Part of the school veered toward Tadaka and Mouse. The ratling girl started to run, but Tadaka grabbed her hand and stopped her. He pulled her next to him.

"Be still!" he commanded.

Mouse whimpered and shivered, but did not run.

The Master of Earth chanted. His hat began to spin on top of his head. Faster and faster it whirled, until it was only a blur. The swarm dived at them. As it did, the stones ringing Tadaka's hat seemed to multiply. They fell in a great curtain from the brim down to the ground, encircling the pair.

The bloblike monstrosities hit the spinning stone curtain. Whirling rocks smashed into the flabby bodies, dashing them to liquid fragments. For long minutes, the pulpy sound of stone meeting jellyfish continued. The translucent abominations howled their fury, but they died nonetheless.

Safe within the stone barrier, Tadaka held Mouse's body close, lest she be destroyed by the whirling rocks. He wrapped her shivering tail around his right wrist, just to be sure.

Finally, the flying jellyfish broke off. The swarm dissipated like mist on a summer afternoon, and the individual blobs flew back to their stump.

Tadaka let out a long, low sigh. Mouse, who had stood as still and silent as a statue during the ordeal, whimpered. Tadaka's hat stopped spinning, and its stony barrier drew up like a curtain. The Master of Earth let go of his ratling guide, and she slumped to the ground, sobbing.

Down slope, nothing remained of Chihu but clothes and bones. Tadaka took off his hat and examined the site. The stones around the rim crumbled to dust. He had used up every trace of power they possessed—but they had saved his life, and Mouse's.

"I'm sorry we couldn't save Chihu," he said.

The weeping ratling nodded. "Chihu should not throw stone."

"I know," Tadaka said. "Even a small mistake in this awful place can be fatal. Come. We need to get moving. No telling what else this swarm may have stirred up."

Mouse rose and looked around nervously. She saw nothing but cloying gray mist.

Tadaka turned and hiked through a cleft between the black rocks, leaving the Howling Mire behind. Mouse scrambled after him. For a long time, they walked in silence.

The country became broken, scarred by ravines and sharp outcroppings. Most of the rock was black and shot through with greenish taint. Always the luminous gray mist concealed the dangers that lurked ahead. The trail emptied into a high-walled ravine. The floor of the defile was covered with slick ebony glass, like a frozen black river.

"N-not far now," Mouse said, her furry body still shaking. She was close to being overcome by their travails.

The Master of Earth tested the black glass to make sure it would not give way. Then he and his companion ventured out onto the surface. Tadaka had trouble keeping his footing on the smooth rock. He cursed the hellish land for not aiding his travel. Mouse had fewer problems. Her padded feet and claws gave her extra traction on the slick stone. Her long tail aided her balance as well.

Tadaka felt glad when, all at once, Mouse stopped and pointed to the cliff face. "We must climb."

The rock on the escarpment was no friendlier to the Master of Earth, but at least it was rough and scaleable. Tadaka dug his fingers into small cracks and slowly made his way up the rock face. Mouse clambered up quickly and easily like a rat up a tree.

She reached a broad flat place in the cliff face and gave Tadaka a hand up. He pulled himself onto the rocky table and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"Just over ridge," Mouse whispered.

The sky had grown darker as they climbed. Now they no longer moved in a gray fog, but in a stormy gloom. Distant lightning cast nightmare shadows across the landscape.

Tadaka used his hands to feel his way up the final few feet of rock. Mouse crept up beside him. He removed his pointed hat, laid it down, and peeked up over the top of the rock.

A chill wind caressed his face through his black hood. Lightning Hashed in the distance. What it illuminated made Tadaka's blood run cold.

A great fortress thrust up out of the valley below. Its iron walls entwined with the evil black rock of the Shadowlands. The fortress was tall—at least six stories in some of its towers—and sharp spikes encrusted its every corner. The windows of the high tower blazed red with fell light. The apertures looked like eyes, and the fortress's sloped roofs like gigantic brows. At the bottom of the wall lay a great door—the gaping mouth of Junzo's war machine. Spikes resembling huge teeth thrust down from the doorframe.

The countenance of the Iron Fortress leered at the Master of Earth, as if daring him to venture inside.

Mouse's furry face poked up next to him atop the ridge. "Can Mouse go home now?" she asked nervously.

The Master of Earth nodded. "If you wish, yes," he said. "You've done your duty and I thank you for it."

"Be careful careful, Tadaka-sama. Not get killed."

"Stay safe yourself, Mouse-san," he said. "Are you sure you don't want to wait until my business is completed? I could escort you back through the Howling Mire."

The ratling shook her head. "No. Mouse know swamp. Lived through twice. This place evil evil. Chills nezumi bones." She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

"The Fortunes go with you, then," Tadaka said.

His companion nodded and scrambled down the escarpment. Soon, the darkness of the ravine swallowed her.

"I thought she'd never leave," a familiar voice said.

"Ob," Tadaka groaned, "are you real, or an illusion brought on by exhaustion?"

The mujina shrugged and patted his childlike body as he hovered near Tadaka's left shoulder. "I feel pretty real, at least to myself. You can't touch me of course, but..."

"Don't be so sure of that," Tadaka said grimly.

The Mujina looked at the Master of Earth and frowned. "Do you have a plan for getting inside?" Ob asked, his rubbery face looking almost comically annoyed.

"I haven't studied the situation, yet," Tadaka said. He yawned. His mind felt clouded. He wondered how long it had been since he had last slept. "I need to rest before I advance."

"I was only asking because, if you didn't have a plan, I might be able to help." Ob's voice seemed to come from a long way off.

Tadaka sighed and allowed his head to dip back below the crest of the slope. "You? Help? I doubt it," he said wearily.

"No, really," the mujina said, his voice drifting away through the gloom.

Tadaka sat down and closed his eyes. "If you want to help, stand guard while I meditate."

"Sure, I guard—as long as you listen," Ob replied. "You listening?"

Gray fog consumed the mujina's words. Gradually, the fog turned black.

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Tadaka awoke to a rumbling sound that shook the escarpment like thunder. He had meant only to meditate, not sleep, and cursed himself for having dozed off.

Ob sat on a rock nearby. The mujina propped his fists on his bloated belly and twirled his thumbs in elaborate patterns. A broad smile cracked his round face as Tadaka looked at him.

"I was beginning to think you'd *never* wake up," Ob said.

A dull rumble came from the cliff top. "What's going on?" Tadaka asked, trying to regain his bearings. His brain still felt loggy. However long he had slept, it hadn't been long enough.

Ob shrugged. "Something's up with the castle."

Annoyed at the mujina's casual attitude, Tadaka crept up and poked his head back over the escarpment. Ob quickly came to hover near the Master of Earth's shoulder.

From inside the castle's door, Tadaka heard a massive bolt being drawn back. A crack formed in the center of the gates and slowly, with a rumbling like thunder, they slid open.

Shapes appeared in the tunnel beyond the portal. Men on horseback—no, not men, undead warriors, and not horses, but onikage—demon steeds. The phantom army rode out in pre-arranged rows. Green-veined black armor clad the skeletal bodies of both the undead samurai and their mounts.

Goblins rode in the army as well, and ogres strode among the onikage and their riders. There were oni, too—hideous demons bristling with horns, spikes, claws, and teeth. Some of the creatures were familiar to Tadaka; other types he did not recognize. He felt both relief and disappointment that the Oni no Akuma was not among the monsters. The fell troops marched in a never-ending stream, stretching back into the darkness and out of sight.

At the head of the column rode a nightmare figure. He was dressed in rotting crimson robes. His white hair fell past his shoulders in a grizzled avalanche. His limbs were long and nearly devoid of meat. The bones of his skull shown clearly through the translucent skin on his withered face. His eyes blazed with the evil power of the Shadowlands. Green fire played up and down his moldering attire. He held a dozen blood-red scrolls tucked under his bony arms—a veritable library of dark magic.

"Junzo!" Tadaka whispered.

The mujina beside him grew pale.

Rage mounted within the Master of Earth: rage at the corruption of this place; rage at Junzo's many crimes; rage that he had been forced to come to the Shadowlands once more. Silently, Tadaka unslung the bow from his back. He reached for a jade-tipped arrow.

Ob's hand fell atop Tadaka's, and for a moment, the mujina felt solid. "Are you crazy?" Ob whispered harshly. "Even if

you kill him, what do you think will happen then? You can't fight that entire army!"

"Perhaps if I kill him, *no one* will have to fight that army," Tadaka said. A dreadful weariness still clung to him. He wanted this journey to be over.

"So, you'll sacrifice yourself on the off chance that Junzo's death will break up the dark forces? Do you really think that will happen?"

Behind his hood, Tadaka frowned.

"Damn right it won't," Ob said. "Killing him probably wouldn't even slow them down. Look at the size of that army! Chances are they're heading straight for the Kaiu Kabe—the Carpenter's Wall. They've enough samurai, goblins, and oni to make a good assault, too."

"The Crab will stop them," Tadaka said.

"Maybe," replied the mujina. "They've got a better chance to do it than you do, at any rate. All you can do by taking potshots at that bunch is get yourself killed."

"Killing Junzo would be worth it."

"And you're so sure that you could kill him before a thousand of his minions descend on you? If you are, go ahead and do it. If your mission was to come here and die foolishly, I won't stop you." The mujina folded his arms across his red chest and hung quietly in the air, flapping his batlike wings.

Tadaka lay silently against the escarpment. Slowly, his weariness slipped away, replaced once more by samurai

determination.

He put away his bow. "You're right," he said. "Getting killed is not my mission."

He clenched his jaw and, through eyes narrow with anger, watched the great Shadowlands army march out of the gate and into a wide ravine at the castle's base. Ob uncrossed his arms and joined the Master of Earth's vigil.

For nearly an hour the Shadowlands host streamed forth, a black plague upon a blighted landscape. Finally, the last of them exited the castle, and the great gates thundered shut, locking of their own accord.

Tadaka and Ob watched grimly as the hind runners disappeared into the gloom of the wide ravine.

"Hope your rat friend avoids that army," Ob said.

"So do I," said Tadaka, the cloud of the enemy's evil filling his mind. "I pray the Fortunes will watch over her."

"How about praying the Fortunes watch over us?"

Tadaka looked at the mujina and smiled grimly, despite himself. "Your presence here proves the Fortunes are against me."

"If you think that's funny, your sense of humor must have been corrupted by this place," Ob said. "So, do you have a plan for getting inside ... ?"

"Not yet," Tadaka said.

"... because if you don't, I do."

"You have a plan?" Tadaka asked skeptically.

"While you slept, I looked around a bit. You might be interested in what I found."

"It's possible I might," Tadaka agreed. He turned to face his floating companion.

"So," Ob said, "do you want my help or not?" The mujina polished his long fingernails against his red chest.

"Accursed imp!" Tadaka said, his eyes blazing angrily. "If you're here to aid me, do so. Otherwise, vanish back to whatever netherworld you came from. I don't have the time or energy for your games."

"All right!" Ob said. "No need to shout. If you were thinking of going over the castle walls, forget it. They're guarded and filled with death traps besides."

"You found a better way in?" "Yep," Ob said with a toothy grin.

"Well?" Tadaka said. "Out with it!"

"There's a crack in the cliff wall on the other side of the castle," Ob said. "It's a pretty tight squeeze for you, but it widens out once you get inside."

"And what's inside?" Tadaka asked.

"A passageway into the catacombs beneath the fortress."

"If you're telling the truth, it could be of great help to me," Tadaka said.

"Why would I lie?" Ob asked.

"I have no idea," the Master of Earth replied. "I have no idea why you're following me in the first place."

"A guy gets bored living in the Shadowlands," the mujina said. "In case you hadn't noticed, there's not a lot to do. Before you, I had no one to talk to."

"Show me the way," Tadaka said.

Ob flitted ahead, across the ridgeline. Tadaka followed as best he could, scrambling over the tainted rocks, trying to keep out of sight of the castle's guards. The mujina stayed ahead of the shugenja, looking annoyed if Tadaka fell behind.

By the time they reached the gap in the cliff face, Tadaka was drenched with sweat, and his hands were covered with small nicks and cuts.

The cleft lay hidden from the castle by a jutting escarpment of black stone. Tadaka frowned. The opening wasn't much wider than his chest.

"Well?" Ob asked. "Are you waiting for some patrol to come find you? Go in!"

"You first," the shugenja said.

The mujina frowned and flitted into the hole. "Happy?"

Tadaka smiled grimly. He took off his hat and thrust it into the opening ahead of him. Then he squeezed in himself. The cold stone pressed his chest, making it hard to breathe.

For a moment, panic rose up in Tadaka's gut. Many times he had crawled within the bowels of the earth—but each time, the stone had been his ally. Here, the stone was his enemy. It might snap shut on him any minute, crushing his life out.

Tadaka fought down the fear and pushed through. True to the mujina's word, the passage opened out a few paces beyond the entrance. Tadaka put his hat back on and inhaled deeply. A smell of decay hung in the atmosphere.

"Lead on," Tadaka said to Ob.

The mujina flinched. "To tell you the truth, I didn't intend on going farther. I thought I'd wait for you near the ravine."

"You said there was a way into the castle," Tadaka said.
"Show it to me."

"I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you. Going farther is pretty dangerous."

"You're a coward," Tadaka said.

"And live to tell of it," Ob replied.

"How do I know you haven't led me into a trap?"

The mujina looked offended. "Hey! Would I come with you all this way just to see you killed?"

"Would you?" Tadaka asked.

"I see your point," Ob said. "I'll go with you a little farther. Once we get in sight of the catacombs, though, I'm gone. There are some things a mujina isn't meant to see."

Tadaka nodded. "Agreed. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Ob said, "especially if you're caught."

The course they followed burrowed wormlike into the tainted rock, twisting and turning, doubling back on itself. Green veins in the rock provided faint illumination. The walls had been worn smooth by water or heat. The unnatural aura of the place made the hair on his neck stand on end. The Master of liarth whispered sutras to calm his nerves.

The tunnels had a disquieting effect on the mujina as well. Ob fell silent. He glanced about nervously and peered down each passage they came to. Finally he said, "This is it." He waved his small, red hand at an opening in the rock. A dripping sound came from beyond.

"Best of luck to you," Ob said. "Good Fortunes, and all that, I ime for me to go. If you make it out, I'll meet you on the ridge above the front entrance. Don't expect me to wait forever, though."

"I won't," said Tadaka. He adjusted his hat, pulled his black hood up tight over his nose, and walked through the opening.

Ob shrugged and flitted out the way they'd come.

The catacombs beneath the castle stank with death and decay. Even with his mouth and nose covered by silk, Tadaka had to resist the urge to gag. The stale air stung his eyes, making them water. Niches filled with rotting bodies—some human, some not—lined the walls. Translucent, greenish water dripped from the ceiling and splashed into oily puddles.

Tadaka reached into the sleeves of his kimono and found some small pieces of jade. The scrapes on his palms burned where the green stone touched him. The Master of Earth ignored the pain and concentrated on his surroundings.

No sounds came but the dripping of tainted water, no light save the pale green luminescence of the stone. Reaching out with his mind, Tadaka could not feel the good earth beneath his feet, no matter how long he tried. At this point, the taint stretched all the way to Rokugan's living heart.

Tadaka added two more jade stones to those already in his hands. The gems could instantly become deadly missiles. He ran the stones through his fingers, feeling their smooth, cool surfaces. They calmed his soul.

He reached out with his mind again. The black rock of the Shadowlands tasted like poison. The jade in his hands almost couldn't overcome it. Tadaka's mind pressed on through tainted rock, searching for the nexus of evil. Through stone and air and iron, he located it. He locked the location in his mind and returned his consciousness to his body. He shivered from the effort.

He found a jade arrowhead in the folds of his robe. Putting his other stones in his left hand, he held the arrowhead in his right and raised it to his lips. Softly, he whispered instructions to the jade, and then blew life into it.

The arrowhead spun in his palm, indicating the direction he must travel to reach the evil heart of the fortress. Tadaka set off. The path was quiet and surprisingly free of defenders. Perhaps all the castle's denizens had ridden off to war.

A sound from a passageway to his right belied that suspicion. Tadaka pressed against the wall and vanished into

the shadows.

A patrol of four heavily armored goblins passed right by him.

They clattered off down the hall, chattering evilly in their debased language. An urge to kill the foul things welled up in Tadaka, but he forced it down. He consulted the enchanted arrowhead and crept into the passage the goblins had just left.

It opened out into a wide hallway. The ceiling thrust up out of the rock, iron rafters supporting the black stone. The Master of Earth came to a winding stairway and ascended it. At the top, his arrow pointed left, down a broad hall. Wary of guards, Tadaka proceeded. The hall passed a great set of double doors. Tadaka's arrow pointed at them.

The iron doors stood nearly as high as the ceiling—taller than three men—and were carved with fell creatures and the leering faces of demons. No, not carved, *formed*. The eyes of the doors watched him. The faces studied the Master of Earth with narrowed eyes and sinister expressions. Fortunately, the leering mouths shouted no warning to the castle's master.

Tadaka put his hands on the door and pushed. The doors didn't open; their iron chilled his hands. A metal serpent slithered down the door's surface and struck at the Master of Earth. Tadaka grabbed the serpent and crushed it against the jade in his hand. The unliving creature writhed a moment before Tadaka pinched it in two. The black metal fell to the floor and dissolved into a pool of noxious slime. A smile crept over the Master of Earth's stern lips.

Other creatures in the door began to move. Pocketing his jade, he pressed his palms against the doors, one on each

side. He spoke a word of power.

The air sparked, and the doors flew open. Tadaka stepped inside, and the doors slammed shut behind him. The Master of Earth's eyes grew wide.

The chamber he stood in rose high into the air, iron beams arching overhead like the ribs of a gigantic beast. The room was windowless, and no other doors led in or out. Iron lanterns hung about the chamber at regular intervals. Their red glass panes cast eerie, flickering light about the room.

Grotesque, twisted statuary decorated the floor. The sculptures depicted people and animals tortured by unseen hands. Perhaps they were once living beings, turned to iron by the castle's evil enchantments. Some of the hideous sculptures had been formed into furniture: a short, black, stone-topped table, a low seat padded with human skin, an obscene chest of drawers . . .

Niches and vaults lined the walls of the room. Some were filled with skulls, others with vials, still others with the preserved entrails of forgotten beasts. Some held scroll cases, the kanji on them whispering of dark magics.

None of this attracted Tadaka's attention, though.

What drew his eyes were the three scrolls on the far side of the room. Green, hellish light surrounded them as they hung in the air, unmoving, at chest height. No stands or pedestals supported them, only arcane magic. The scrolls lay open, ready for inspection by the master of the castle. Their surfaces were cracked and pitted—their heavy silk black, like old leather. Sickly green kanji burned on their surfaces.

Even from across the room, Tadaka knew he had found Junzo's Black Scrolls.

THE WAY OF AIR

Isawa Uona sat on the mountain peak and gazed out over the cloud tops. Fluffy white billows shielded the world below from the Mistress of Air's pale brown eyes. From this height, all of Rokugan looked serene. No wars; no plague; no famine. Peace reigned across the land.

Uona drank in the tranquillity. She had arrived at the mountain not long after leaving the bloodstained monastery. In her mind, she still saw the fire in Isawa Tsuke's eyes as he held his Black Scroll and bade her good-bye. His mission was complete, and he'd had a good fight. Tsuke took joy in battle. He was easily the most warlike of the Elemental Masters. Even Tadaka, with all his travails in the Shadowlands, took less pleasure in fighting.

Combat was a pleasure Isawa Uona didn't share. Yes, she reveled in her power; all of the Elemental Masters did. Yes, she could cause much havoc, but she preferred other avenues of

expression: calming storms, creating gentle winds for sailing, and of course, flying.

The Mistress of Air could travel very quickly. When she took flight, rivers, forests, and rough terrain didn't matter. She could not fly constantly, of course; even an Elemental Master's power had its limits. She'd expended quite a bit of energy in the fight at the monastery, and so she'd had to stop three times before reaching her destination, the towering pinnacle known as Narayama— "Mountain of the Ancient Ghosts."

The mountain was unreachable by normal folk—a phantom seen only fleetingly above the clouds. The Mistress of Air located Narayama quickly on the fourth day of her journey. It lay deep within Rokugan's northern range, Seikitsu sano Yama no Oi. Narayama's icy peak thrust high into the air, its summit curving back down toward its lower slopes. It looked like the immense, beckoning finger of a frozen god.

Uona soon discovered the hiding place of the Black Scroll she had been sent to fetch. The research she'd done in the Phoenix library gave her good directions. Yet she did not claim the artifact at once.

Instead, she perched atop the sloping peak and drank in the world below. She sat there for days, perhaps longer, her powers shielding her from the elements and sustaining her through hunger and thirst.

Though the quest for the scrolls was urgent, she had time before she needed to return home. She cherished that time. The other Elemental Masters would be able to reach her—just as they had on her last journey to a mountaintop. She did not expect any such message this time.

Tsuke's mission was complete. Isawa Tomo had likely finished his task as well. She had utter confidence in the Master of Water. In fact, she quite liked him—though she would never admit it to his face. Tomo always seemed so happy. Necessity didn't drive him the way it did Tsuke, Tadaka, Kaede, and—yes—even herself. Of all of them, Tomo seemed best to understand the Tao of Shinsei.

For a fleeting moment, Uona wished her heart held such enlightenment. She pushed the thought aside. Tomo's placidity could also be a weakness. Of them all, he was the

one most likely to be content where the river of life took him. Uona did not like the river's current direction.

The Black Scroll. In her mind, she saw it, encased in ice, in a cave just below the summit of Narayama. What secrets the scroll held! How it might help their people in the war against Yogo Iunzo and his dark master! Yet...

Yet she worried, in a way she could never admit to anyone, even—at times—herself. Did she deserve such knowledge? Could she control such dark power? Could any of them? A frown creased the Mistress of Air's pretty face.

She felt suddenly ashamed. Surely she had put such doubts behind when she ascended to her lofty position. She was the Mistress of Air, one of the Council of Five—supreme commanders of the Phoenix and the best shugenja in all Rokugan. Such thoughts were unworthy of her.

How the others would laugh if they suspected her doubts.

Uona drew a sharp breath. The cold air bit into her lungs. The time had come.

Standing, she put her foot on the slope and glided effortlessly down the icy peak. She slid along the frozen surface, arms extended to her sides, reveling in the sensation. Her red and gold kimono billowed out like a sail. The wind crept between the silk layers and caressed her body.

She skidded to a stop, her feet kicking up a spray of ice crystals. The sun turned the frozen shards into a glittering rainbow. Before her loomed the ice cave, its depths tinted blue with frigid air. At the limits of her vision rose a sheer

wall of ice. In that wall lurked a dark shape—the case of the third Black Scroll.

Uona stepped into the cave. Her sandalled feet made small puffs of snow as she walked. She passed the threshold and entered the blue gloom. Huge icicles, like stalactites, depended from the ceiling; their stalagmite brothers thrust up from the floor. Uona felt as if she were walking into the maw of some gigantic, frozen beast.

She wound her way through the icicles to the translucent wall. The Mistress of Air put her hand against the frozen surface and chanted. The wall was riddled with small cracks, fissures that would make her job easier. Howling winds came to do their mistress' bidding.

Uona manipulated the wailing breezes into the cracks, widening the fissures and pushing the ice apart.

Suddenly, the wall shattered.

Uona started, barely able to form a protective barrier around herself as shards of ice flew. An icy dagger ripped her kimono and traced a line across her hip where the winds hadn't surrounded her quickly enough. Uona bit her lip and ignored the pain. A thousand razor shards fell to the floor.

Then, something strange happened. Before Uona's startled eyes, the shapes on the floor reformed. Soon a thousand tiny ice samurai surrounded the Mistress of Air. The samurai screamed, a sound like breaking glass, and charged.

They were on her before Uona fully comprehended what was happening—climbing her kimono, cutting with their tiny swords. Uona shrieked with pain. She tried to brush the

diminutive samurai away, but was cut deeply on her right palm.

The discomfort brought her to her senses. She raised her arms above her head and calmed her mind. The samurai climbed steadily upward, scaling the Mistress of Air as if she were a mountain. Uona summoned the power of the air. Winds howled in anger and rushed to protect their mistress. They encircled her, thrusting the tiny invaders aside and embracing her.

The small samurai flew away. Many fell to the ground; smashing when they hit. Some were blown out of the cave entirely. They toppled helplessly until they struck the mountain face far below. Those few that remained, Uona crushed under her sandals. She took some satisfaction in the crunching sound the samurai made when they died.

Uona inhaled deeply and looked down. Her legs and hips were covered with tiny cuts, as if she'd scraped her body against a rocky hillside. The skirts of her beautiful red and gold kimono had been completely shredded. The silk hung in tatters from the obi at her waist. She frowned, wishing briefly there had been more samurai to vent her anger on.

Pushing the thought aside, she reached into the gap in the icy wall and seized the Black Scroll. The case was bitter cold, colder than ice; her hands burned at the touch. She turned the wind into a protective barrier, but where her magic met that of the scroll, angry green sparks flew up.

Uona worried the conflicting magics might harm the artifact. She tore some tatters from her kimono and wrapped the scroll case in them.

Thus protected, she took up the scroll. The cold still stung her, but Uona could bear it awhile. She flew out of the cave, back to Kyuden Isawa. Behind her, Narayama vanished into the clouds.

JUNZO'S LAIR

The floating Black Scrolls held the Master of Earth's attention for long moments. Then he noticed something else.

A pedestal made from writhing iron scorpions sat in front of the three floating scrolls. On the stand lay a sealed scroll case. It was wrinkled, like the skin of an ancient serpent. Shimmering kanji covered its black surface—spells intended to hold the evil power within.

That power whispered to Tadaka. The ancient case held a fourth Black Scroll—Tadaka felt it in his bones. What's more, the scroll had not yet been opened; Junzo hadn't used its dark power.

The Master of Earth smiled grimly. The evil shugenja would never wield the power of that scroll. Tadaka crossed to the pedestal, a sudden impulse compelling him pick up the artifact. At the last second, he stayed his hand.

Surely Junzo would not leave such a prize unguarded—even here, in the heart of the Iron

Fortress. A low chant whispered from Tadaka's lips. He closed his eyes. When he opened them again he could see the dark enchantments surrounding the pedestal.

Malevolent red energies, like the arms of an octopus, twined around the scroll case, binding it to its base. Other auras left

the scroll and snaked out across the room, embracing a freakish sculpture, two sai hanging on the wall, another scroll, and several additional artifacts. These objects were the scroll's guardians. Tadaka would have to break the magical connections before he could take the scroll. Otherwise, the powers of the ensnared artifacts would attack him.

Sundering the magical tendrils might also awaken the items, so Tadaka would have to twist the auras, bend them away from the scroll case. None of the standard spells would do. He would have to create a new variation.

Sweat beaded on the Master of Earth's brow. The Fortunes only knew how much time he had. The room's dark magic tugged on his mind. He rubbed his brow and closed his eyes. The chants and invocations for dozens of spells flashed through his memory—none quite right. Mystical auras were tricky, far more suited to his sister Kaede's magics.

The knowledge you need is before you, a voice whispered in his mind.

Tadaka started and opened his eyes. Looking around, he saw no one. Nothing moved in the room. The sound of his own nervous breathing filled his ears. Had it been his own mind that spoke? Tadaka forced his will into iron. He would find the proper spell to release the scroll. If he calmed his mind, the solution would be within easy grasp.

Slowly, Tadaka realized that he was right—literally.

The three Black Scrolls glowed brightly in their supporting auras just a few paces away. The scrolls were repositories of great magical knowledge. Surely they would have the power to free their "brother." If Tadaka were to scan them ...

The Master of Earth took a tentative step forward. He felt the power of the scrolls calling him. He took another step on leaden feet. A third step. He put his hand out, but a warning sprang up in his mind. No. He wouldn't touch them. He didn't need to. He needed only to look, to study—to read the blazing kanji on the black silk.

Slowly, he forced his eyes to the first scroll.

A bolt like lightning blazed into his eyes. Tadaka's body shook. His brain tingled, as if a thousand ants were crawling over it. The kanji burned into his mind, setting off thoughts and memories that the Master of Earth didn't know he possessed. The power to free the fourth scroll was here—that, and so much more.

He moved quickly from one scroll to the next, drinking in what he saw, not daring to touch the artifacts or unroll them further. Time slowed to a crawl. How long he lingered over the black silks, Tadaka could not have said. The scrolls scribed their arcane knowledge on his mind. He could read their powerful kanji even with his eyes shut.

When he finally forced his eyes away, Tadaka knew the answer. It was so simple, he couldn't imagine why he hadn't seen the solution before.

He stepped back to the ensorcelled scroll case and began to chant. The energies surrounding the scroll pulsed and danced. They grew brighter, and then dimmer, keeping time with the Master of Earth's drone. He attuned his mind to the spell, and then attuned the spell to his will. Finally, the magical auras parted. They drew back slowly, like metal bars bending in the hands of a strongman. A gap in the magical cage opened—a hole large enough to retrieve the prize.

Tadaka stuck his hand through the opening and withdrew the sealed Black Scroll. He clutched the ebony scroll case to his breast and chanted the auras shut once more.

He stepped back and exhaled slowly.

Without warning, red energy streaked from the case and up through the vaulted ceiling. The chamber trembled, as though with an earthquake. A crimson glow took shape opposite the room's main door. The malevolent energy opened like the maw of a giant oni. Through the portal stepped the corrupt form of Yogo Junzo.

A smile cracked the evil shugenja's wizened face.

"So, Tadaka," he said, "come to visit your old friend Junzo, eh?"

You should have informed me you'd be dropping by. I would have arranged a proper reception." Junzo's tattered robes and ornate jewelry made no sound as he walked toward the Master of Earth.

Junzo circled the Phoenix master slowly. Tadaka turned with him, keeping his eyes on his enemy. The Master of Earth clutched the fourth scroll tightly to his chest.

"To what do I owe this honor?" Junzo asked, his honeyed voice dripping venom. "Have you come to join me after all? I hope so. Together, we could rule all of Rokugan."

"If you had your way, Fu Leng would rule the world," Tadaka said, "and you would be his lap dog."

"Not a dog," Junzo said, still circling, "a friend. A confidant. A mighty daimyo serving his emperor. You could be one, too."

We would be equals, you and I—like brothers: I, the first servant of the lord, and you his first follower."

As Junzo circled, the room's artifacts assumed a life of their own. Oni statues climbed down the chamber's skeletal walls. The skin-covered seat grew a demonic face and crept forward. The great chest snapped its drawers open and shut, hoping to find flesh to devour. Tadaka cursed himself for not seeing the trap sooner.

Junzo held out his plague-stained palm to the Phoenix shugenja. "Take my hand, Tadaka," he said. "Fu Leng is generous with his friends, but merciless to his enemies."

"Never!" Tadaka cried. He found a small jade star in the sleeve of his robe and flung it at his enemy.

The star sliced through the air. Junzo brought up his hand to ward it off. The points of the dart sliced across Junzo's palm, and he bled evil red energy. Tadaka shoved the scroll case into his belt and drew his katana.

"Kill him!" Junzo shrieked, pointing his wounded hand at the Phoenix.

The scorpion stand that had held the fourth scroll shattered into pieces—each an iron scorpion. The creatures quickly devoured one another, growing as they did. Soon, only four of the monsters remained, each the size of a large dog. The scorpions scuttled forward to attack.

As the monsters grew, Tadaka reached the entrance, but the serpents and centipedes on the door had twined their metal bodies around each other, forming a dense, tangled lock. Metal snakes struck out at the Master of Earth. He fended off

the attacks with his sword. Then, realizing he could not escape quickly, Tadaka turned back to the giant scorpions.

His jade-studded katana sliced off the fore claws of the first one. The beast tried to sting with its tail, but Tadaka kicked its body and sent it tumbling back into its fellows. Another scorpion's stinger struck the first creature as it flew. Where the stinger hit, green magic leaked out. The monster fell to the floor and dissolved into festering black liquid.

The other scorpions bore in on the Master of Earth. They snapped with their palm-sized claws and lashed out with their long tails. Tadaka batted the blows aside with his katana. He sliced the stinger from one, but it retreated before he could run his sword through its head. When its fellows pressed Tadaka, it scuttled in again, clacking its claws.

The Master of Earth was running out of room. Behind him, the living iron door waited with open jaws and grasping coils, liefore him, the giant scorpions slashed and stung. The walls of the room were springing to life as well. Hideous shapes, like demons being born, formed out of the ribs of the vault. Amid the chaos stood Junzo, concentrating, directing the attack— laughing.

A stinger caught the silk below Tadaka's left elbow. He cut the tail off with his sword, but a claw sliced a deep gash below his right knee.

Tadaka staggered back and was nearly caught by the writhing shapes in the door. He wheeled to his right, only to find demonic statues climbing down from their perches in the high ceiling.

The Master of Earth plucked his round hat from his head. A quick chant turned it into an expanding net of ironlike reeds. He tossed the hat on the remaining scorpions; their claws and legs quickly became entangled in the mesh.

Tadaka leapt over the pile and flung himself at Junzo. He drew his wakizashi with his left hand and slashed with both swords as he landed.

The undead shugenja merely vanished into red mist before the blows struck home.

Tadaka wheeled, searching for his enemy.

Junzo stood near the door, waving his hands in the air, gathering red magics. The abominations rallied toward him; soon none stood between the sorcerer and the Master of Earth. The Black Scrolls rolled themselves closed, as if making room for their master to fight.

By the time Tadaka realized what was happening, it was almost too late.

Junzo spread his hands, palm outward. Deadly crimson energies blasted forth. They screamed across the room.

Quickly, the Master of Earth sheathed his wakizashi, drew forth his jade fan, and flicked the fan open.

The jade artifact took the brunt of the blast, but the force knocked Tadaka onto his backside. The fan deflected the energies, like water bouncing off a stone. Crimson magic exploded against the wall opposite the door. The whole room shook. Dust fell from the ceiling, and the blasted wall shuddered and crumbled.

Tadaka saw his salvation. Beyond the new hole in the wall lay a passage—escape.

The Phoenix Master of Earth rose to his feet. The remains of his jade fan fell to the flagstones and shattered into black shards. Junzo's forces reeled from the power of their master's attack. Summoning all the energy he could muster, Tadaka drew on the purity within his own body. The jade of his soul would be his most potent weapon. If it failed, he was doomed.

Tadaka's mind reached out to the evil sorcerer and felt his taint. Thrusting his hands out, Tadaka sent the jade purity within himself to fight for possession of Junzo's body. Power crashed in coruscating waves.

Junzo staggered under the impact, and then screamed. The power of the spell ran wild, shattering the iron beasts nearest the sorcerer. Junzo's limbs stiffened. His skin cracked, and began to turn green—the color of jade.

"Kill him!" Junzo whispered to his iron allies.

The beasts turned toward Tadaka and advanced.

The Master of Earth wheeled and ran for the hole in the wall. A demonic statue dropped on him from above, but he cut it in two. The pieces fell, writhing, to the floor and turned into putrescent black slime.

Tadaka darted into the tunnel. He heard Junzo chanting a counterspell behind him, but he did not look back. The cold weight of the fourth black scroll hung from his belt.

Sounds of pursuit followed. Sheathing his katana, Tadaka fished a large rock out of the sleeve of his kimono. The

natural tunnel he was running through was narrow, and barely taller than his head. The Master of Earth hoped the stone he held would be enough.

Kissing its smooth, cold surface, he whispered a command to the rock and dropped it. As he ran beyond it, the stone grew huge, filling the passage—blocking pursuit.

Despite himself, a smile cracked Tadaka's lips. He used the last of his strength to chant a seeking spell. He needed to find the way out of this maze. Junzo's forces would dog him, but his Tomb of Jade spell would delay the evil sorcerer. Even a master shugenja like Junzo could not move quickly with his skin turned to jade.

Great goutts of sweat poured down Tadaka's brow and into his eyes. He blinked the moisture back and pressed on. Though his limbs felt like stone, he ran until the tainted breeze of the Shadow-lands caressed his cheeks anew.

FLIGHT

The sounds of Tadaka's footsteps echoed across the bleak landscape. The worn soles of his sandals kicked up dust where they hit the cracked earth. The Master of Earth's breath came in short puffs and, occasionally, long gasps.

"Slow down, will you?" Ob said. "I'm having trouble keeping up!"

"Jigoku take you then, mujina," Tadaka said. "You've been running for days," the imp replied, "but we haven't seen any sign of pursuit since you left the Iron Fortress."

"Just because we have not seen them," Tadaka said, "does not mean we're not pursued."

The mujina shrugged his shoulders and flapped his tiny wings harder to keep up. "Okay, I'll give you that," Ob said. "But, it doesn't mean someone *is* chasing us, either."

Tadaka's hand went to his belt, where the stolen Black Scroll still hung. The scroll case felt cold and clammy; Tadaka's sweaty palm

nearly slipped off the top. "They have enough reason to pursue, believe me."

"But we got through the Howling Mire without any trouble," Ob said.

Tadaka laughed ruefully. "Perhaps fighting bog hounds isn't *your* idea of trouble ..." he said. "Oh, I forgot, you vanished—as usual—when the monsters appeared."

"Just showing good sense," Ob replied. "Wouldn't you have vanished if you could have?"

"Sadly, that option is not open to me," Tadaka said. He reached up and wiped the sweat from his brow. Reflexively, he went to adjust his hat but remembered he had lost it in Junzo's castle.

"So," Ob said, "do you keep running until you drop?"

Tadaka nodded. "Yes. Or until I'm out of Junzo's reach."

"And when would that be?" the mujina asked. "You can't run all the way back to Phoenix lands."

"On the other side of the Kaiu Kabe," the Master of Earth replied. "Perhaps."

"So you're just going to run until you reach Crab lands?"

Again, Tadaka nodded. "And I would run better without talking, if you don't mind."

"Maybe we could stop at that ratling village along the way," Ob said. "We could use a break."

Tadaka slowed just a bit. "Perhaps," he said.

The thought of resting had begun to play on his mind. He'd used up most of his reserves fighting Junzo and hadn't had time to recover. The bog hounds had depleted him even further. The land itself turned against him. Chasms yawned as wide as canyons. The cliffs grew steeper and the downward slopes more treacherous. The strange undulations of the land played havoc with his sense of balance and direction.

Whispers plagued his ears, even past the edge of the Howling Mire. The slow wane of the tainted earth hadn't renewed Tadaka's strength either. He was bone tired. Every muscle in his body ached.

Yes, perhaps he could rest at the ratling village—if only for an hour or two. Just enough time to eat, drink, and meditate. He'd run out of fresh water about two days ago and had gone without ever since. The nezumi might have decent enough water to chance a drink. It was a gamble he could take.

"Is it far to the nezumi village?" Tadaka said.

"I was hoping you'd ask," Ob replied. "By my reckoning, it's only three hills that way." He pointed his small red hand at a slight angle from the direction they were traveling.

"Let's go, then," Tadaka said. He turned the way the mujina indicated, adjusting his meager possessions. His obi still held the Black Scroll tucked tight.

The iridescent gray mist of the Shadowlands swirled around them. Stinging plants lashed out with flabby tendrils. Sandals crunched some squealing thing as he ran, but Tadaka didn't stop to see what it was.

He kept his mind focused on the ratling village, on water, on leaving the Shadowlands far behind. First, though, water.

Ob flitted around him, in front and behind. He babbled constantly. Tadaka didn't pay attention. The mujina's words were just part of the din that assaulted the Master of Earth.

Tadaka almost didn't notice when the stone escarpment surrounding the nezumi village sprang up before him. It loomed like a graveyard out of the mist, its natural pillars looking like vast monuments to the dead.

A slight smile cracked Tadaka's dry lips. He took a deep breath and coughed it out in an involuntary spasm. Even a mud hut and a straw bed would seem like paradise.

He slowed as he neared the gap, trying to catch his breath. He looked around, but saw no sign of the mujina. Suddenly, his legs filled with lead. He staggered forward, leaning against the rocks of the entryway. They felt cold, lifeless to his touch. They brought no respite from his pain and exhaustion. The Master of Earth willed his legs forward. One step, then another, and then another. He passed between the stones and peered into the bowl-like clearing.

Fog filled the village, limiting his sight to only a few feet. He fell to his knees, happy to have reached safety. Only as he

lowered his head to the ground did he wonder—where are the sentries?

Tadaka looked up. An evil breeze caught the mist and pulled the fog back like a curtain. Before him lay the nezumi village — destroyed. Not one hut remained.

He whipped his head from side to side, drinking in the awful spectacle. The huts had been burned to the ground, or knocked down like a child's toys. Desiccated corpses lay everywhere—so dry that even the flies stayed away. Checking the ground, Tadaka saw signs of horsemen everywhere.

Junzo's undead army had come back.

Perhaps it had been the very army Tadaka had seen riding out of the Iron Fortress. The undead legion had taken their revenge against the nezumi village.

Tadaka put his head to the ground and wept bitter tears. He pounded his fist on the earth until the sound drowned out the beating of the blood in his ears. He wailed a mournful cry to the heavens.

Only after long minutes did he remember why he had come. Water. Perhaps there was still some to be found—some that hadn't been ruined by Junzo's horde.

He staggered to his feet and looked across the blasted village. Beyond Ke-o-kecha's hut he had seen a small well. Tadaka willed his legs to walk in that direction.

Nothing remained of the hut itself. Tadaka thought of the gentle way the nezumi had soothed his wounds and tended

to his needs. His jaw grew tight at the memory. Beyond the burned patch lay a jumble of stones—once the well.

Tadaka knelt and tore frantically at the rocks, casting them aside vigorously. Soon, he had cleared the top of the small shaft. No rope or bucket remained, so he reached down with his hand. He stuck his arm into the hole all the way to the shoulder, hoping beyond hope to find the liquid he needed.

Something wet tantalized his fingertips. He reached further, straining with all his might to cup the precious fluid in his palm. His body shook with the effort. Water filled the bowl of his hand. Quickly, he brought it up out of the hole and to his lips.

His nose saved him.

A noxious smell filled his nostrils, and Tadaka looked at the handful of water before he drank. It was dark, like mud, and tainted with a glowing green putrescence. Uttering an agonized cry, Tadaka flung the liquid from his hands and wiped his palm on his kimono. He bowed his head and wept.

When he staggered to his feet again, the mist had grown thicker. Now, it was almost a fine rain. Tadaka lifted his lips to the heavens, but the fog wouldn't quench his thirst—only remind him how thirsty he was.

A sound caught his ear—a vague, tinkling sound, like babbling wind chimes. Could it be water? Perhaps the rain was heavier up in the hills. Perhaps it was trickling down the cliff face, near where he'd first entered the nezumi village. Hope rising in his breast, he staggered on weary legs toward the escarpment.

The gray fog swirled around him, embracing his body in clammy arms. The mist worked its way into his lungs, making him cough. His body shuddered with the effort.

Yes. He saw it now. A tiny rivulet of dripping water, splashing on a flat stone.

Licking his cracked lips, he made his way toward it. He pressed his hands to the rocks on each side of the stone to support himself. The flat rock was barely wet. Perhaps, though, it would be enough.

He touched his fingers to the stone and then brought his hand to his mouth. Wet. Clean tasting. Wonderful. So little of it, (hough. He leaned forward to lap up the moisture.

Something hard and heavy landed on Tadaka's shoulders.

He fell to the ground, one arm pinned under him, the other splayed wide. Neither hand could reach a weapon.

The creature on top of Tadaka slavered and gibbered. Sharp claws slashed at the back of his kimono. He felt his skin breaking and warm blood oozing from long scratches. He screamed in pain, shock, and anger.

The earth supported him, barely. His mind numb from thirst and toil, he called on the power of the rock. New strength flowed into his limbs. Not much, but enough.

The Master of Earth flexed his shoulders and rolled to the left. He shook off the creature, but it swiped at him with its claws as he went. The talons traced a fiery gash down Tadaka's left arm.

He kicked out with his foot. His toe connected with something solid. Guts. Perhaps ribs. The creature rolled away, a tornado of fur and claws.

Tadaka scrambled to his feet and drew his sword. Fog swirled between the Master of Earth and his opponent. Tadaka waited for the charge, unsure if he possessed the strength to attack. He angled his weapon low, for a hip-to-breastbone cut. The creature charged.

"Tadaka, no!" Ob's voice yelled. A stone sailed through the air, striking the creature's forehead. The monster yelped and staggered.

Tadaka stepped aside, avoiding the flailing claws. He twisted the katana in his hand and brought the pommel crashing down on the back of the creature's head.

The monster fell heavily to the ground and lay there, weeping. It was Mouse.

Her heavily matted fur shivered, and her eyes darted wildly. A small gash above her right eye bled where the mujina's rock had hit her. She babbled and cried as she lay on the bare earth. When Tadaka took a step toward her, she cowered away.

"Mouse!" Tadaka said. "It's me. Your friend Tadaka. Don't you remember me?"

The ratiing merely curled herself into a ball and wept.

Tadaka sheathed his sword.

Ob flitted over to Tadaka's shoulder and said, "I had to stop you. She doesn't know what she's doing."

Tadaka nodded. "I'm glad you did," he said. "Mouse deserves better than death at my hand. She must have found her village like this when she returned. The shock unhinged her mind. What a terrible fate."

The mujina looked around plaintively at the ruins of the nezumi village. "We could bring her with us," he said. "You can take her back to your castle and fix her up. She'll be good as new again."

Tadaka shook his head ruefully. "I hardly have strength to walk myself—never mind dragging her on my back."

"Y-you know I can't carry things," the mujina said, his lower lip shaking. "I would if I could, but...!"

Tadaka nodded. "Yes, I know. You're just a mischievous spirit.

Anything bigger than a bowl of fruit is beyond your power."

A tear peeking out of his eye, Ob said, "We can't leave her like this. Maybe I should have let you kill her after all."

Tadaka looked at Mouse's quivering form, lying helpless before him. His hand went to the hilt of his katana, and then drew away. He shook his head.

"True," he said, "it might be a mercy to kill her, but I cannot find it in my heart to do so. We cannot see the ends fate has planned for us. Perhaps the Fortunes will smile on Mouse again some day."

"I hope so," Ob said.

"I, too," Tadaka said. He reached down to Mouse's furry head, placed his hand on her brow, and recited a sutra of calming.

The ratling's wild eyes closed, and she slept.

Tadaka built a small shelter for her with rocks and placed her prostrate body inside. "Sleep well, my friend," he said. He chanted a prayer to safeguard the nezumi, but his tongue tripped over the words. Tiredness overwhelmed him, and he nearly fell.

"You okay?"

"Yes, Ob, I'll be all right," Tadaka said. Drawing what strength he could from the earth, he walked back to the escarpment. The trickle of water had stopped, but a small amount lay on the surface of the flat rock. Tadaka shimmied up the rock, placed his face to the stone, and lapped up the moisture.

When nothing more remained, he stood and staggered out of the small bowl-shaped valley. Ob flew beside him. As they left, they could hear the gentle sobs of Mouse, last of the Long Tail Pack. The gray mists of the Shadowlands soon swallowed both the village and the weeping.

The fog confounded Tadaka's brain. He lost all sense of time and distance as he walked. Thirst robbed him of his strength; exhaustion stole his reason.

The mujina helped him stay on course. Through constant babbling and gentle prodding, Ob steered the weary Master of Earth through the nightmare landscape toward the edge of the Shadowlands.

Once, in his delirium, Tadaka thought he heard the cry of the Oni no Akuma—his longtime nemesis. He would have charged off into a swamp if the mujina hadn't put a stick in his way. Tadaka tripped, landing flat on his face. The fall

bloodied his nose, but it also restored his senses, at least for a time.

The ground became alternately hard and spongy. Tadaka's food ran out. The scrabbling sounds of hidden fauna haunted him. He wondered if they might be good to eat. Rivulets of poison crossed his path and became fountains of his desire. Once, he almost dipped his hand into one. A cry from the mujina stopped him.

Finally, Tadaka could go no farther. The world swam around him, and his senses went dark. He hardly felt the ground strike his body as he slumped to the earth. How long he lay there, he could not have said.

He woke to a small breeze blowing across his face and an unpleasant smell in his nostrils. When he forced his heavy eyelids open, he saw the mujina sitting next to him, fanning his face with small batlike wings.

Ob said, "I got something for you."

In his small, red hands, the mujina held out a broad leaf, filled with clear, pure water. Tadaka fell on it in a frenzy, greedily sucking every drop.

"Careful!" Ob said. "You don't want to spill any!"

Tadaka slowed down, savoring the tepid liquid. It restored some of his strength, but more of his hope. He inhaled, and the air didn't seem quite so oppressive as it had before.

"Ob," he said wearily, "where did you get this?"

The mujina pointed. Through the fog, Tadaka saw the land rising into brown hills. "You were almost out when you

collapsed," Ob said. "I found a stream two hills over. Think you can make it that far?"

Tadaka sat up. It was true. He'd come to the very edge of the Shadowlands.

Impending sunset painted the edges of the high clouds golden. Tadaka had seldom seen anything so beautiful.

He stood on shaky legs.

"Thank you, Ob," he said.

The mujina nodded. "Don't mention it."

The Master of Earth staggered forward. In two hundred steps he placed his feet on good, solid earth once more. He climbed up the hills, enjoying even the scrape of the stone against his skin as he pulled himself along.

One hill passed, and then another. Brown vegetation clung in the cracks, and green lichens covered the rocks. A small evergreen, no more than a hand high, stood between the boulders.

"I thought you said it was two hills over," Tadaka complained.

"I underestimated," the mujina said, "just to get you going. It's not far now, I promise."

A cold breeze tumbled down from unseen heights, chilling the Master of Earth. He took a deep breath and coughed. The fresh air felt like needles in his lungs after so long in the poison atmosphere of the Shadowlands. He coughed until his ribs ached.

"Just over this rise," Ob said. "Really."

"Mujina, if you're lying ..."

"What are you going to do, fall on me?"

Behind his dirty hood, a smile split Tadaka's cracked lips. He forced himself to walk one more time. His swords clattered on his left hip, as heavy as a boulder. The scroll case dug into his right hip, reminding Tadaka of the burden he carried to his clan. His feet skidded on small rocks. Twice he caught himself, saving a precipitous fall. He topped the rise and heard a sound sweeter than music.

At the bottom of the slope ran a small stream, winding between jagged rocks. Tadaka stumbled downhill toward it. He could smell the water—pure, fresh, cold. He didn't mind the stones that slipped into his sandals. He didn't mind the scrapes on his hands. All that mattered was to drink.

He threw himself down by the rivulet and pulled his hood back from his mouth. He pursed his lips and placed them to the surface of the stream. For a long time, he lay there and drank, listening to the song of the water.

The sound of clattering stone roused him. He looked up.

A figure walked downstream toward him—the Kuni witch hunter.

Her jade mask wore the same grim expression it had when they had first met. Her black hair tumbled past her waist. Her

white robes billowed in the slight breeze. She picked her way among the stones. In her hand, she held a forked spear.

Leaning against a tall rock, Tadaka waved to her. The witch hunter lowered her spear and charged.

THE EYES OF DARKNESS

Isawa Kaede frowned as Kachiko put a white stone on the board and surrounded two of her black stones. A smile broke over the empress' beautiful face, though Kaede noticed worry lines behind her Scorpion mask. Despite her careful demeanor, something was troubling the Mother of Scorpions.

The two of them sat inside an audience chamber, not far from the throne room. They had been forced indoors by the weather, too cold and rainy for a match by the lotus pond. They'd played many games within the castle walls of late—not all of them over an ishii board. Paper lanterns lit the chamber with flickering red light. The air smelled of incense.

I am trapped, Kaede thought—realizing the parallel between the game and her life. Every day the walls of the castle weighed more heavily on her. In the distance, she could hear the banging of carpenters. On her way to the game, she had passed plasterers trying to whitewash

decay from the castle's mighty walls. With the fortress' windows closed, the air had become oppressive, almost diseased.

"I see no escape for you, Kaede-san," Kachiko said.

Kaede nodded grimly. "Nor do I pass."

"As do I," Kachiko replied. "I believe that gives me the game." She smiled, but victory sparkled less brightly in the empress' black eyes. Kachiko straightened the folds in her immense robes. "Thank you for the game, Kaede."

Kaede bowed low. "It is I who thank you, Kachiko-sama," she said.

Kachiko nodded her acknowledgment. She turned to the man sitting on her left. He was a thin, muscular samurai, dressed in midnight blue with a red obi and collar. His face was ruggedly handsome behind his sparse mask, though his black eyes showed the travails he had lived through.

"Aramoro," Kachiko said to him, "see that Mistress Kaede reaches her chambers safely." Aramoro, the half-brother of Kachiko's dead husband, nodded and rose.

"Domo arigato, Kachiko-sama," Kaede said, "but I can find my own way." She rose to go.

"As you wish," Kachiko said. She motioned for Aramoro to seat himself once more. He did.

"Shall we have another game tomorrow?" Kaede asked.

Kachiko shook her head, her long black hair forming sensuous waves as she did so. "Not tomorrow," she said. "I have other affairs that need tending. Perhaps at the end of the week."

Kaede bowed. "As you wish, Empress." She turned and went to the door. Two samurai dressed in the same midnight blue as Aramoro drew back the fusuma panel covering the room's entrance. Kaede stepped through and into the long hall beyond. Guards nodded at her but did not impede her passage. She chose a path toward the castle's exterior, hoping to get some air to clear the gloom from her head.

When she came to an outside wall, she found a window and propped open the shutter. Cold wind blew in, bringing with it

a few flakes of snow. The breeze tossed Kaede's black hair and nipped her cheeks. She stood there for a while, taking long, deep breaths. Ishikawa found her, still at the window.

"Feeling all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I just needed some fresh air."

"Perhaps a walk would do you good?" he asked.

"In this weather?" she replied.

"There's a tearoom on the near edge of the western gardens," he said. "I built a fire there this morning."

Kaede nodded. "I'll put on something warmer."

Ishikawa bowed, and the two of them walked back to her quarters. It didn't take Kaede long to change. She added woolen socks and a heavy outer robe to her kimono. A round straw hat fastened with a silk scarf completed her ensemble.

Ishikawa sent servants ahead to prepare the room. He waited while Kaede changed. Neither spoke much until they arrived at the tearoom. Ishikawa pulled open the shoji screen to admit Kaede, and then closed it behind them.

They sat on the thick tatami mat that covered the wooden floor, one on each side of the small fire pit that provided heat. A pot of tea had been set over the fire. Ishikawa poured some for each of them into delicate lacquer cups.

The setting brought Kaede wistful memories of tea ceremonies past. This serene place seemed so far from the decaying castle, even though it was just a short distance

from the once-white walls. She took a sip of her tea, savoring the warm liquid as it ran down her throat.

"Thank you, Ishikawa," she said, "for arranging this."

He nodded. "Think nothing of it. It's my job to plan for every contingency." He took a sip of tea and smiled at her.

A blush of color rushed into Kaede's cheeks. She turned her eyes down. "Any word from your brother?"

"No word from Kiaku himself," Ishikawa said, "though I have heard o/him from other sources. Apparently he reached Toturi's army safely. I gather he's happy to be there, though their burdens are great."

Kaede nodded. "Hai, I imagine they must be. This winter has been difficult for all of Rokugan."

"The Black Lion especially, I think," Ishikawa said. "Toturi has few friends, and not enough supplies, probably. The Unicorn say that the peasants support him—though that's exactly what you'd

expect the Unicorn to claim."

"Their clan is very close to the soil," Kaede said.

"Too close, if you ask me," Ishikawa replied. "But I hope what they're saying is true. I may not agree with my brother's choice, but I don't wish him unnecessary hardship."

Kaede had a sudden insight. "Ishikawa, my friend, would you have gone with him if I were not here, at the castle?"

The captain of the guard frowned and folded his arms over his broad chest. "I know where my duty lies."

Kaede smiled slightly. "I know that, but you haven't answered my question. If I were to leave here, would you leave as well? I know that your term of service is long passed. Your commission would allow you to live where you liked. Would you leave if I did?"

"Are you thinking of leaving?" he asked.

"Constantly. I can hardly think of anything else."

"You've had word of your brother, Tadaka, then?"

She shook her head. "No. No news. I can't feel him in my mind, either."

"You fear him dead, then?"

"No," she said. "He still lives. I'm sure of it. He's just beyond the reach of my power."

"Why return home, then?" Ishikawa asked. "You can't hold the council without him."

"I would return home before this place destroys my soul," she said, feeling emotions well up. "I can hardly bear to be here any longer. The walls of the castle weigh me down, the air crushes my lungs. There is evil in here, Ishikawa, pure evil."

Ishikawa nodded. "Hai, the empress."

She shook her head. "No, beyond that. Something even Kachiko can't control. A sickness, like the plague that

poisons the land—but not a physical sickness, a disease of the soul."

"So, why don't you leave?"

"I doubt the empress will let me," Kaede said. "She wearies of our cat-and-mouse games, but she doesn't want me to go."

"She's like a serpent that torments a caged bird."

"A bird. Yes." Kaede said, adjusting her feather-patterned kimono. "But I'm not sure if she's tormenting me, or trying—in her own way—to ask for help." "Help?" Ishikawa scoffed. "That woman? What kind of help could she need that her brother-in-law couldn't provide?"

"Even revenge grows stale after a time, my friend," Kaede said. She reached across the gently smoldering fire pit and put her hand on his.

Ishikawa started to reply, and then stopped. He closed his mouth and looked into the eyes of the Mistress of the Void.

"I... " she began, and then faltered, her lips slightly parted.

He leaned over the fire pit and kissed her. Heat from the coals welled up between them. Sweat formed on their brows. Kaede twined her fingers around his. Ishikawa drank the sweetness of her lips.

With a shudder, she pulled free. Their lips parted, and they both sat back on their tatami. She pointed her chin down and looked at the floor. He turned his head away from her.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Don't be," she replied quietly. "I wanted to as well. It's just..."

"Just what?" he asked.

"I still have duties to perform," she said, pulling her kimono tight across her breast.

"Is it your engagement to Toturi?" Ishikawa asked. "I thought the emperor called that off."

"What the emperor commands and what the heart feels are two different things."

Ishikawa leaned back; his face grew grim. "You still have feelings for the Black Lion, then."

"Yes. No. I'm not certain," she said. "The whole world seems upside down—especially here, in the Forbidden City."

"Hai," Ishikawa said, nodding grimly. "We should leave," he said. "Both of us. I'll find a way that even the empress can't foil."

She noticed his cup was empty and refilled it. "I cannot go," she replied. "There's something else. Another reason."

"What is it?"

"The heir. You and I saved his life during the coup. I won't abandon him now. I can't, no matter how sick he is—not without trying to help him at least once more."

"You tried before," he said, "but couldn't lift the plague." "I know," she said. "But all these long months I've studied the disease. I know more about it now. Perhaps I can burn the

plague from his body. Perhaps I can succeed where I failed before."

"And if you can't?"

"Then you will need to get us both out of the casde, for I won't have the strength."

Ishikawa nodded.

"The trouble is getting to see Hantei," Kaede said. "Kachiko keeps him locked up tight. If I didn't know better, I'd think she feared him."

"I doubt that," Ishikawa said. "He's still just a boy. And he may not be locked up as tightly as you think."

"What do you mean?"

Ishikawa rubbed his chin. "Recently, I've heard that the emperor wanders the palace late at night."

"Where do you hear such stories?" Kaede asked.

"From the guards. They're willing to tell me things that they'd never tell the Mother of Scorpions. They've seen Hantei prowling the back corridors of the palace, and they're worried. Something about him frightens them. It's as if he were a ghost. The few that have dared speak to him have been quite shaken."

"And you believe these rumors?"

Ishikawa nodded. "I do. Some of the men who have seen him are very reliable."

"Does Kachiko suspect?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "If she did, she'd have someone's head on a pike."

"How could the emperor get past Kachiko and her guards?" Kaede asked.

"Scorpions can't be everywhere at once," Ishikawa said, "not even Kachiko and Aramoro."

Kaede frowned. "So, what do you propose?"

"The next time one of my men sees the emperor, I'll fetch you. We'll speak to him in the dead of night, far from Kachiko's influence."

Kaede nodded. "All right. I'll await your call."

XXXXXXXXXX

Disquieting blackness swirled around Kaede. She found herself wandering the corridors of the palace, not sure of what she was looking for or even where she was. She wore a light kimono. Chill drafts raised goose bumps on her skin and made her shiver. White lanterns cast long shadows before her feet and down the length of the hall.

A figure stepped from the shadows, barring her way. Kaede gasped; it was her father. He reached out and took her arm with his one good hand. Even in the dim light she saw that his fingers were gnarled and pockmarked. His grip was like iron.

"You're hurting me," she said.

Isawa Ujina looked at her, his eyes blazing beneath his hood. "The clan is in danger," he said. "*You* are in danger."

"Father, where have you been?" she asked. "It's been so long since we've seen you."

"They won't listen to me," he said. "You must warn them."

"Warn them of what?"

"The darkness beyond the shadow," the Nameless One said. "They must fight it, not seek it out. Remember! Tell me you'll remember!" He shook her as he said it.

"I'll remember, Father," she said. "But I don't understand. What do you mean?"

"Remember, Kaede. Remember!" he said, still shaking her.

The Mistress of the Void nodded, but the shaking didn't stop.

"Kaede ..." Ujina cried plaintively.

"Kaede!" echoed another voice.

Kaede's eyes snapped open. She was lying on the futon in her room at the palace. A strong hand gripped her shoulder. A husky voice whispered in her ear. "Kaede!" The voice belonged to Ishikawa.

Kaede sat up. "I was dreaming," she said. She ran her hands through her raven hair. Her sleeping kimono fell in revealing folds around her body.

"Kaede, it's time," Ishikawa said. He let go of her shoulder and looked toward the door.

"Time for what?" she asked sleepily.

"I've found the emperor," Ishikawa said. "Get dressed. We must go quickly."

The fog of sleep left Kaede's mind, and she nodded. Ishikawa stood guard while she fetched a heavier robe.

They walked quickly through the halls, their bare feet making hardly a sound. Ishikawa used a series of secret passages to move through the palace. Finally, they reached a little-used corridor abutting the southern wall.

Rounding a corner, they saw the wan form of Hantei the 39th. The boy emperor had propped open a small window and stood looking out across the bare gardens. He wore a pale silk kimono, decorated with designs of mountains and waterfalls.

Ishikawa looked cautiously back down the corridor. "I'll stand guard—buy you time in case anyone comes. You go to the emperor. See what you can do."

She nodded and said, "Be careful, Ishikawa." Reaching out, she squeezed his hand. His flesh felt warm and strong in the darkness.

"You, too," he replied, letting her hand drop. He took up a position at the corner, out of sight of the emperor. Kaede turned and walked toward the boy.

For a moment, Kaede wondered if she were still dreaming. Hantei stood still and silent. She couldn't even hear him breathing. She walked to within arm's reach before he turned to her. His brow was slick with sweat; his eyes were dark and liquid.

"Kaede," he said languidly. "It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes, Majesty," she said, bowing deeply. "It is I."

"I couldn't be sure," he said, turning back to the window.
"Everything seems like a dream sometimes."

"Hai," Kaede replied. "I know what you mean. What are you looking at, Majesty?"

"I'm trying to see my father," the boy said. "But I can't make him out through the snow."

"Otennoo-sama," she said quietly, "your father is dead."

"Is he?" Hantei replied. "I would swear that I hear him calling me. His voice is quiet, as if it comes from far away."

"It's your fever speaking, Sire," Kaede said. "Perhaps I could lessen the fire."

"Could you?" Hantei said, smiling. "I think I'd like that." He turned to her and held out his thin fingers.

She reached out, embracing his pale hands in her dark-skinned ones. His skin was cold, clammy, his flesh soft—little more than skin over his bones.

"Relax, Majesty. Open your mind to the healing."

Hantei looked into her eyes. Kaede saw darkness behind his liquid orbs. She reached out with the power of the Void. Their eyes locked; their breath grew shallow; their hearts beat in time with each other.

Kaede felt the pain of the emperor's heart in her own chest. His pulse was weak, irregular, fast. She let her power flow. Hantei's heartbeat slowed and became stronger. She moved on, feeling disease in every fiber of his being. It wrapped around his spine like a serpent, coiling and crushing. She thrust it back, clearing the paths of his nerves, sending the pain into infinity. She was winning this time! Winning!

Disease surged through his blood. No, not plague, poison—some terrible venom brought on by the illness. She tried to fight it but could not. She needed Hantei's help, but he was too weak. She would have to strengthen him, give him hope.

She melded their beings in the Void. She sought out his chi — the seat of his soul, the eternal heart of the samurai. Blackness sprang up around her like ink, but she pressed deeper, ever deeper.

I will enlist his spirit in the battle, she thought. Together, we will banish this illness.

She swam through the toxic sea of darkness, seeking the soul within. Finally, she saw a pinpoint of light, like a distant star. Urging her mind on, she flew toward it.

Kaede raced forward. She could see its shape now—a man, strong and powerful; Hantei as he should be. The man had his back turned, looking away from the troubles that assailed him.

She slowed as she drew near. Gently, she touched him on the shoulder. The glowing man turned. In his eyes, Kaede saw darkness, utter, complete darkness. A leering smile drew across his pleasant face, turning his countenance demonic.

He reached toward her. She tried to pull back, but he caught her hands. His black eyes bored into her. Kaede's soul began to burn. She screamed and pulled back with all her might.

The spell broke.

Kaede opened her eyes and discovered the emperor's black orbs gazing at her. A slight smile broke across his waxen face. "Thank you," he said quietly. "Domo arigato, Kaede-chan."

Kaede gasped, and her knees buckled. She fell to the floor, hitting her head against the hard wood. Dazed, she heard footsteps running toward her.

"Kaede!" Ishikawa cried. "What happened? Are you all right? Where's the emperor?" He helped her sit.

Kaede looked around. The boy emperor was nowhere to be seen. "I don't know. I don't know where he's gone."

"Did you ... Did you *cure* him?" Ishikawa asked.

Kaede shook her head, and her eyes moistened with tears. "I couldn't," she gasped. "I couldn't."

"I'm sure you did your best," Ishikawa said. He put his strong arms around her shaking body.

"It wasn't enough," she sobbed. "Not nearly enough. There's nothing more I can do. Get me out of here, Ishikawa. I need to go home. I need to see my brothers. Take me home to Kyuden Isawa."

Ishikawa nodded and said, "I'll see to it."

THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS

For a moment, Tadaka didn't believe his eyes.

The Kuni witch hunter looked like a pale ghost leaping down the defile. Her black hair streamed behind her. Her kimono billowed like a specter's robes. The demonic face of her mask leered at him. She aimed both tips of her double spear toward Tadaka's heart.

"Wait!" he called. "It's me, Isawa Tadaka!" If the witch hunter heard, she didn't reply. Instead, she thrust at the Master of Earth's chest.

Tadaka ducked aside. The points of her spear sliced the front of his tattered red kimono. She swung the spear sideways, like a staff, and caught him full in the chest.

The air whooshed out of Tadaka's lungs, and he fell heavily against a tall rock. Pain shot up his back, and his skull

glanced off the stone. For a moment, spots danced before his eyes. The witch hunter jabbed her spear at his

chest again. Tadaka drew his katana only just in time to parry the thrust.

"Have you gone mad?" he asked, spinning to his left. His left foot sank into the stream, and he nearly stumbled. The witch hunter spun her spear, aiming the butt end at his head. Tadaka ducked out of the way and retreated.

The water at his ankles was cold, and the rocks underfoot were slippery. He splashed down the rivulet, trying to put some distance between himself and his foe.

The witch hunter leapt down the stream after him. She used a rock on the right to jump to a taller one on the left. The Kuni vaulted high into the air, arcing over Tadaka's head. She landed lightly on her sandals behind him and slashed at his midsection.

Tadaka wheeled. The cut missed him, but he stumbled back into the water. The witch hunter recovered and thrust at him again. Her aim was off, and the spear passed harmlessly between his right arm and his ribs.

Tadaka seized a handful of gravel from the riverbed and flung it at her. Mud splattered her face and stones clattered off her jade mask. She shook her head, trying to clear her eyes, and flourished her spear in a defensive swirl.

The Master of Earth staggered to his feet and grabbed the shaft of the weapon. He yanked hard, and the witch hunter lost her balance. She tumbled face first into the stream. Tadaka stepped past her as she wheeled, a jade knife suddenly in her hand.

"Curse you!" Tadaka said. "Why are we fighting? We were friends last time we met!"

The witch hunter didn't reply. Instead, she threw her tanto dagger at the Master of Earth.

He batted it aside with his sword as the witch hunter rose to her feet. From within her robes she produced a jade globe, about the size of a chestnut. She threw it at his heart.

Tadaka leapt back, slashing at the globe with his sword. Metal met jade, and the globe exploded into a ball of green flame. Tadaka fled backward as the ball expanded. Hot air singed his lungs. He prayed that he could keep his footing in the rough terrain.

The witch hunter meant to kill him. Whether she was possessed, or undead, or crazy no longer mattered. He would have to use every means at his disposal to destroy her—or she would surely destroy him.

The green fireball disbursed, leaving a clinging powder that stung Tadaka's eyes. The witch hunter advanced, swinging her double-pronged spear in an intricate kata.

Tadaka retreated downstream. The boulders around them grew tall and started to show faint traces of Shadowlands taint. Tadaka tried to call out to the stone, but pain and exhaustion made his brain numb; the earth didn't listen. He knew he would have to buy time until he could bring his full prowess to bear.

"Ob, blast it!" Tadaka called. "I could use some help here!" If the mujina heard, he didn't answer.

"Call your demon friends," the Kuni witch hunter said, her voice as cold as ice. "I'll slay them as well." She paced steadily downstream after Tadaka, her forked spear ready.

Tadaka kept retreating, biding his time, hoping to regain some of his lost strength. He placed his left hand against a boulder on the riverbank and felt a rumbling within. The sound of clattering rocks pricked his ears.

The witch hunter heard it too and looked up. Stones rained down on them: first pebbles, then rocks, and then boulders.

"Landslide!" Tadaka cried.

"Your tricks won't save you!" the witch hunter screamed. She stepped back as the stones fell. A fist-sized rock caught her in the temple, shattering the upper portion of her mask. She grunted loudly as she fell back into the stream.

"Hoo ha!" said Ob. "Was that a good trick, or what?" He appeared above the stream just in front of the fallen Kuni. "Pretty cool what a small rock in the right place can do, eh?"

"Ob, look out!" Tadaka cried.

The mujina vanished just as the witch hunter's spear cut the air where he had been hovering.

"Cursed goblins!" the witch hunter said, rising to her feet. Her white robes were stained with mud and soaked with water. The kimono clung to her iron-sinewed limbs and skeletal body. She pulled another green globe from a hidden pocket in her sleeve.

Tadaka turned and ran, putting as many large boulders between him and the Kuni as he could.

Green fire roared down the defile after him, charring the rocks and filling the chasm with clinging green dust. Tadaka pulled his black hood up tight across his nose and kept running. Ahead, of him, the defile opened out into the flats at the edge of the Shadowlands.

He emerged farther south than he had entered the hills, but the landscape before him looked just as forbidding—cracked earth, stunted plants, gray mist.

The green fireball hadn't seriously hurt him. Additionally, it had kept the Kuni from following too closely.

Reaching the end of the defile, Tadaka darted to the left, keeping close against the tall boulders. The tainted soil of the Shadowlands reached nearly to the hills, splashing up against the pure rock like an evil surf.

He raised his sword in a defensive posture and said a sutra to clear his mind. Forms of incantations danced in his brain. He felt the power of the earth seeping back into his soul.

The Kuni witch hunter sailed out of the defile, arcing high in the air like a pale, bony ghost. She landed solidly on her sandalled feet and turned to face her foe.

Tadaka held his katana ready. "Why do you fight me?" he asked.

"You will not pass," she said, cold venom in her voice.

"My mission is vital!" he said. "You know it. You know who I am."

"I know who you claim to be, but I also know what you are," she said. "You will not pass."

Tadaka heard her inhaling in long gasps. At least, she is as mortal as I am. "I *must* return to my homeland."

"The only way you will return to the land of the Phoenix," the Kuni said, "is as a ghost." Her eyes gleamed darkly behind her broken mask.

"So be it," Tadaka replied. The vigor of the earth filled his limbs once more. Dropping his sword into an attack position, he charged.

He cut high, but the Kuni parried. She swept low with the spear, but Tadaka leapt over it. He kicked her in the midsection, and she staggered back. He spun and sliced at her neck.

The witch hunter twirled her long forked spear and batted Tadaka's blade aside. She swept up and across his chest, cutting the billowing folds of his dirty red kimono.

The sky grew dark with clouds. Thunder echoed in the distance.

Tadaka danced back out of the way of her follow-up thrust. He spun to his right and sliced at her midsection. She turned, but not in time. Tadaka's blade traced a long line across her ribs, just above her left hip.

She gasped and swung hard at him. He parried her blade with his katana, but the force of the blow tore the sword from his hand. It flew through the air and clattered on the dry, tainted ground. Its blade sparked where it hit.

The Master of Earth jumped aside as she slashed at him once more. He drew his wakizashi and angled toward his lost sword, trying to regain it. The Kuni bore in, jabbing at his

middle. Tadaka batted the spear aside with his smaller sword.

Suddenly, the Kuni stopped. She held her spear in her left hand and reached into her sleeve with her right. Her hand came out holding a jade dart, shaped like a long, thin triangle.

Tadaka scuttled back, across the cracked earth, keeping his eye on the witch hunter. As she threw, he swatted the dart out of the air. He didn't see the second one concealed in her palm.

It followed close behind its brother. It caught Tadaka in the arm, just below his left elbow. Tadaka gasped; the wound burned with fire. The witch hunter charged forward, her spear ready for the kill.

Ignoring the pain, Tadaka transferred his wakizashi into his left hand and rolled to his right. He swept up the katana with his right hand as she came in on him. Gaining his feet, he caught the blades of her spear between his two swords.

The Kuni thrust at him, but he forced the spear up, over his head. Releasing it, he whirled his blades, batting the spear's shaft with his left and chopping with his right. Splinters flew where katana met shaft, but the spear did not sunder. Instead, the witch hunter pulled back, making short jabs to keep him on his guard.

Tadaka's left arm began to go numb from pain and the dart's arcane fire. The witch hunter pressed in; he batted her blades aside as she came, first with one sword, and then the other. She seemed tireless, determination incarnate, death made flesh. Though her breathing came heavily, the pale

brow behind her broken mask showed only a faint sheen of sweat.

Despite the renewal the earth and fresh water gave him, Tadaka's strength waned once more. He'd been too long without sleep, too long without nourishment. He knew he wouldn't be able to sustain his two-sword attack for much longer. His left arm ached from its wound; the dart seemed to burrow ever deeper into his flesh.

In desperation, he flung his wakizashi at the Kuni. The move caught the witch hunter completely by surprise. The short blade spun through the air, and sliced into the hunter's left shoulder. The Kuni gasped and nearly dropped her long spear.

Tadaka scrambled back, shifting his katana to his left hand. He deftly plucked the fiery dart out of his arm and threw it to the blackened earth. As the Kuni brought her forked spear up once more, he resumed a two-handed defensive stance.

"Now, it ends," she said, her voice ragged with determination. She charged. The forked spear thrust; Tadaka's sword flashed. The weapons met—the katana's blade caught between the forks of the spear.

The two foes stared at each other across the weapons, each trying to force the other back. Tadaka's muscles knotted. Sweat finally poured down the Kuni's brow. Blood stained their kimonos. They circled, caught in a macabre dance.

Overhead, the storm broke. Lightning flashed and thunder shook the hills. Rain poured down around them in great cascades. Still the samurai held.

They shifted back and forth on the edge of the Shadowlands. Spongy earth replaced hard rock beneath their sandals. Fire spread down Tadaka's wounded arm and through his body. The Kuni gasped with exertion.

They struggled, pushing each other across the rocky hills. Tadaka glimpsed the pure stones of the foothills. Close enough, he hoped, to provide his salvation.

In the midst of pain and effort, clarity came. He let his body fight the battle while his mind wandered free. He felt the earth within his soul and called out to it. Beneath his feet, the land shuddered.

The Master of Earth sprang back as a huge circle of black boulders sprouted up in front of him. The witch hunter tried to jump away, but her spear shattered on a giant green-veined stone. The rocks hemmed her in, pressed around her, squeezed her breath out. They towered above her head as the Kuni clawed at the sky. The witch hunter screamed.

With horror, Tadaka realized what had happened.

He had called out to the earth, and it had responded. But it was not the pure stone of the hills that had answered his call—it was the tainted rock of the Shadowlands.

"No!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. "lie!" The thunder echoed his words. Tadaka poured forth every remaining trace of his power, and the black stones crumbled. The Kuni witch hunter fell prostrate to the earth. Rain washed her blood away in small crimson rivulets.

Tadaka sheathed his sword and rushed to her side.

"I'm sorry," he said. The rain made it seem as if his whole body wept.

"We are not... finished ... yet____" the Kuni said weakly. She tried to raise her hand, but it fell limply into the mud. Her eyes fluttered shut, and her body went slack.

"She looks in real bad shape," Ob said, appearing near Tadaka's ear.

"It's my fault," said Tadaka. "I should have known when she attacked me. I should have seen." He reached beneath his kimono and pulled the jade amulet from around his neck.

"Should have seen what?" the mujina asked.

Tadaka looked at the blackened talisman and shook his head. "Not now," he said. He let the amulet drop. It fell to the rain-damp earth and shattered into a thousand ebony shards.

"You going to finish her off?" Ob asked. "You know she'll come after you if you don't."

Tadaka's hand stole unconsciously to the hilt of his sword. He felt its weight on his hip, balanced by the scroll case on the other side of his belt. He should kill her. She was a threat to his mission. If she recovered, she would dog him all the way back to Phoenix lands.

His resolve firmed. The fire she'd inflicted on his left arm burned. He tightened his grip on his katana. The blank eyes of the Kuni's broken mask stared up at him accusingly. Blood leaked from beneath the mask and ran down her chin.

Tadaka let go of the sword.

"No," he said. "I won't kill her. I don't have the right." Unconsciously, his hand stole to the scroll case, still hanging at his hip. "We must get her to shelter."

Ob shrugged. "Sorry I can't help," he said. "But I'll scout ahead for a dry place to put her." He flitted off into the rain. Lightning illumined his small, red body as he darted into the rocks. Then Tadaka saw him no more.

The Master of Earth retrieved his wakizashi from where it lay in the cracked soil. He flicked the mud and blood off the blade and resheathed it. Then he turned to the witch hunter.

She was still unconscious. Her breath came in ragged, shallow gasps. With her spear shattered, there was not enough wood in the area to make a litter; he would have to carry her. Removing her obi from her waist, he used it to bind her hands tightly—lest she should wake and attack him again.

He tried to summon the power of the earth to bolster his strength—but when the black soil responded he cried, "No!" and let the magic slip away.

He walked to the pure rocks of the hills, selected a tall stone, and pressed his face and hands against its wet surface. "Please," he whispered, the rain streaming down his face, "help me!"

The Master of Earth felt something within the rock shudder. He wasn't completely tainted yet; he still possessed the power. He concentrated, but it was not enough. The power slipped away, like sand between his fingers.

Shuddering with cold and exhaustion, soaked to the skin by rain, he returned to the Kuni and hefted her over his broad shoulders. It felt as though he carried the weight of the world.

Staggering under the burden, he made his way back toward the defile.

Ob flitted out of the crevasse to meet him. "I found a dry place under a big overhang. It's not too far from the stream."

"And not far from here, I hope," Tadaka said wearily.

"Not even two hills over," Ob replied, smiling.

The trek up the streambed seemed twice as long going up as it had going down. Soon, though, they came to the place Ob had discovered. Tadaka laid the witch hunter's unconscious form on the dry soil. He took a handful of jade-tipped arrows from his quiver, broke the shafts, and made a fire. Ob found some dry moss to keep the flames smoldering.

"What now?" the Mujina asked.

"I need to rest awhile," Tadaka said. "Then we go on. I need food, too—as soon as we can find it. At least I don't need water." He thrust his hand out from under the overhang and caught some rain. Putting the hand to his lips, he drank.

"I bet she has some food," Ob said.

The Master of Earth's brow furrowed. Certainly the Mujina was right. Witch hunters always brought fresh food and water when they went on patrol.

"After all," Ob said, "you gave her some of your food last time. It's only right that she give you some back."

Tadaka nodded. Gently searching her, he found the pouches that contained her provisions. He left her water, but took most of the food. "She'll need to go home and recover anyway," he said, as much to himself as to the mujina.

He ate. Then he tore strips from his kimono and tended her wounds.

"You sure you want her to live?" Ob asked.

Tadaka nodded. "I'm sure." He dressed her injuries as best he could. After that, he dressed his own. Then he closed his eyes and drifted into a troubled sleep.

He awoke to find the late-morning sun shining on his face. The witch hunter still lay unconscious, though she groaned frequently, and some color had returned to her face.

Better rested, Tadaka tried to summon the power of the pure earth. This time, it responded, though slowly. Strength flowed back into Tadaka's battered body.

Drawing the last of his pure stones from the pockets in his sleeves, he placed them in a ring around the shelter where the witch hunter lay sleeping.

"What you doing?" Ob asked. He flitted down and hovered just behind the shugenja's shoulder.

"Making sure she'll be safe until she regains her senses," Tadaka replied.

"An awful lot of trouble for someone who tried to kill you," the mujina said.

"It's the least I can do," Tadaka said. Kneeling by the witch hunter's body, he undid her bonds. Her eyes flickered open slightly at his touch.

"Kill... you ...!" she gasped.

He shook his head. "Not today. My mission is not yet complete." He reached into his robe and drew out a jade arrowhead—the same one he'd used in Junzo's fortress.

The green stone burned his hand, but he clutched it tightly in his fist while muttering an incantation. When he'd finished, he opened his hand and laid the arrowhead in the witch hunter's palm. "When my task is done," he said, "this stone will lead you to me."

The Kuni nodded her head weakly.

Tadaka rose, ducked out from under the overhang, and turned away. "C'mon, Ob," he said. "It's time to go home."

THE ELEMENTS CONVENE

Isawa Kaede mounted the last stairs and stepped onto the broad wooden engawa surrounding the council chamber. Cold winter rain poured through the garden's open roof, splashing gently into the circular River of Awakening. The lotus flowers had closed their blossoms against the chill—though they still lived, a testament to the garden's power.

Kaede walked around the covered walkway to the far side of the engawa and sat down opposite the entrance. There was no council meeting today—there would be none until Tadaka

returned. Yet Kaede felt the need to be in this place, to drink in its serenity.

Her breath hung in the air like a small white cloud. She pulled her thick kimono tightly against her body to ward off the cold. Her bones still ached from her journey home.

Ishikawa had come with her. He had been her strength after her disastrous encounter with the emperor. They had left the castle

before dawn. Ishikawa's position allowed him to secure safe passage for them both. He didn't tell anyone that the woman traveling with him was Isawa Kaede—though they'd left a polite message for the empress.

The next day, the two of them hooked up with a caravan of Phoenix merchants, and the group had traveled through the Yama no Kuyami—the Mountains of Regret—back to the Phoenix homeland. They encountered no resistance along the way, though Kaede had nightmares every time she slept.

The Mistress of the Void shuddered when she thought of her final encounter with Hantei. Even with all her wisdom, she did not fully understand what had happened. The boy was beyond her power to heal, and this saddened her heart.

Something about him chilled the Mistress of the Void to her bones. There was an emptiness within his soul—not the serene placidity of the Void, but something else ... a darkness waiting to be filled. But waiting for what? For the fever to break? For the sky to fall? For the cold embrace of death? Kaede did not know.

She didn't know whether to fear Kachiko's custody of the boy or fear for her safety. Kaede pushed the thoughts aside.

The Mother of Scorpions could take care of herself.

Kaede closed her eyes and swept her mind clear. She concentrated on the rain falling in the council garden. The gentle sound washed away her apprehension. Soon, the tranquillity of the Void filled her.

A sound from the hatchway in the floor caught her attention. Her brother Tomo's shaved head appeared.

"He's coming!" the Master of Water said excitedly. "Tadaka's coming home."

Kaede stood. She reached out with her mind but still did not feel Tadaka's presence. "How do you know?"

"He's been seen on the road," Tomo said, "not far from the castle." He ducked his head back down the hatchway.

Kaede lifted the skirts of her kimono, walked to the exit, and descended. She pulled the hatch shut behind her.

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The horse Tadaka rode to Kyuden Isawa looked almost as ragged as he did. It was a mangy gray beast, with a shaggy mane and ill-kept tail. The rain turned the animal the color of sludge. It plodded through the downpour without enthusiasm.

The Master of Earth sat astride the beast, his red and black kimono caked with mud. A new straw hat covered his head—it was the best looking thing about him. Even from a tower window, Kaede could see that Tadaka looked tired. She pulled on her sandals and hurried down to meet him.

She found the other Elemental Masters already waiting. Tsuke wore a wide straw hat, like Tadaka's. Uona carried a parasol. Kaede wished she'd thought to bring one. She said nothing as she joined the others at the foot of the castle's broad steps. Tomo stood without any protection at all, enjoying the cold patter of the rain on his shaved head.

Stable hands rushed out to take the animal as Tadaka pulled his horse to a halt. He dismounted, and the servants led the haggard steed away.

Tadaka did not look merely tired, but exhausted. His fine silk clothes hung in tatters from his skeletal frame. His straw sandals were dirty and almost worn through. Only the black hood covering Tadaka's features remained relatively unscathed.

Though he looked like death, powerful green fires still burned in Tadaka's eyes.

Kaede suppressed a shudder. She stepped forward and smiled. "Welcome home, Brother."

Tadaka looked at her and said simply, "Home."

"We've been waiting for you," Tsuke said, his deep voice rumbling like thunder.

"Do you wish to rest, first," Uona asked, "or shall we convene the council immediately?"

"Rest," Tadaka said, his voice barely more than a whisper. "Not long, though. We haven't much time." He put his foot forward, but nearly stumbled over the first low step.

Tomo went forward to support his half-brother. As he caught him under the right arm, his elbow brushed against the charred scroll case that hung at Tadaka's waist. Tomo shivered. "What's this?" he asked, indicating the scroll.

"A Black Scroll," Tadaka said. "I stole it from Junzo."

The four gasped collectively. Kaede stepped forward to support her brother's other arm. Together, they helped Tadaka up the steps and through the gate of Kyuden Isawa. They took the Master of Earth to his room, where he collapsed like one dead. They left Tadaka to sleep.

Tsuke's eyes lingered on the scroll case. "Perhaps we should study it while he sleeps," he said to Uona.

"Plenty of time for that," she replied. "I doubt we'll learn anything new from it. Besides, it's *his* prize."

Tomo and Kaede glanced warily at each other.

Tsuke smiled in grim satisfaction.

A faraway look danced in Uona's eyes.

Tomo reached out his thin hand and slid the fusuma door to Tadaka's room shut. "He'll call us when he's ready."

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The five Elemental Masters sat in a circle on their wooden platforms in the council garden. The bowls of their elements lay before them, and the River of Awakening roiled in its endless circle at their backs. Overhead, the magic of the council turned aside the rain.

Tadaka had woken shortly before sunset. He took his Black Scroll to the vault deep within the Isawa library and sealed it there alongside the other three. Then he summoned the other Elemental Masters to the high tower.

He donned new clothes and looked almost his old self. No one in the chamber could guess the taint hidden by the fine silks of his kimono and hood. After performing the proper rituals, Tadaka inhaled deeply and told the others of his journey.

When he finished, Tsuke frowned. "It's strange the sorcerer would not put up more of a fight."

"I thought it odd, too," Tadaka said, "even though my powers would shield me from detection. I wonder if I faced Junzo in the scroll room, or a simulacrum."

"That would explain it, yes," Uona said. "He couldn't bring his full power to bear that way. Perhaps his enchantment was limited to the chamber itself."

Tadaka nodded. "It would also explain how he could reappear so quickly after riding out of the castle. If it's true, though, he put up a tremendous fight for a phantom."

"All the more reason we need to stop him before he goes any further," Tsuke said. The fire in the bowl before him blazed more brightly for a moment before dying back down.

"Tsuke, Tomo, and I studied the unopened scrolls in your absence," Uona said.

Tadaka thought he heard Kaede gasp, but her face remained serene. The Shadowlands taint hidden beneath the Master of

Earth's clothes tingled with black fire. He resisted the urge to scratch it. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "And ... ?"

"The scrolls resisted our attempts to probe them," Uona continued. "We learned nothing." A look of frustration washed over her pretty face. The winds in her bowl stirred in agitation, and Tadaka imagined he heard the word *open!*

"The scrolls' wards are very powerful," Tomo added softly. He dropped his eyes to the burbling water in his bowl.

Tsuke looked around the garden at the others. His eyes narrowed, and he seemed about to speak. He stopped, though, and said nothing. The corner of his left eye twitched.

"And you, Kaede?" Tadaka asked.

"I fared no better," she said, her liquid eyes filled with sadness. "The emperor is consumed with plague and darkness. I... I could not help him. The empress spins her webs, little realizing she herself is caught in them. The court is decaying, but no one seems willing or able to stop it."

"*We* will stop it," Tsuke said.

Tadaka nodded. "Hai," he said. "The time for action has come." The taint burned, but he ignored it. He inhaled deeply and continued. "In Junzo's lair, I glimpsed the might of the Black Scrolls. That knowledge gave me the strength I needed to escape his evil grasp. The scrolls hold the power of destruction. Perhaps they also hold the power of salvation."

"Shinsei and the Seven Thunders used the scrolls to defeat Fu

Leng," Tomo said quietly. "Is it possible we could do likewise?"

"It *is* possible," Tsuke said, his bass voice booming. "The enemy sweeps toward our homeland, and we are still not wise enough to fight him. We must know more. We must use Junzo's tactics against him."

Tsuke looked around at the others. Night had fallen while they talked, and the fire from his bowl blazed in his eyes. "When Junzo was a Scorpion, we knew to expect treachery from him," the Master of Fire said. "As Fu Leng's pawn, though, he's become both more powerful and more unpredictable."

"We need more knowledge," Uona said, her hair whipping around her head in an unfelt wind, "and there is only one place to get it."

Kaede shook her head and whispered softly. "No ...!"

"What choice do we have?" Tadaka snapped. Sweat ran down his forehead, and the taint blazed. He looked frantically at the others. "We can fight Junzo and his master on their terms, or we can perish. Do you want to end up like Mouse? Or like the Crane? Hoturi's army of the damned is nothing compared to Junzo's. I've seen it! I've seen his power! The only way to fight this evil is to open the Black Scrolls."

Silence hung in the chamber as Tadaka's voice died away.

"No!" Kaede whispered.

"Yes!" Tsuke thundered. "There is no other way!"

"But the price ...!" Kaede said.

"The price may be terrible indeed," Uona replied, "but we're all masters of our craft. If anyone can turn the dark magics of the scrolls to good, it is we. I will pay any price to preserve our homeland. It is the only way. We *must* open the scrolls."

Tomo turned to his sister, concern written on his placid face. "She is right, Kaede."

A hush fell on the chamber. Even the River of Awakening went silent. In the quiet, Tadaka thought he heard Uona's winds whisper *yes*, Tsuke's fire crackle *yes*, Tomo's water burble, *yes* ... even the rocks say, *yes*. Only Kaede's black emptiness remained silent.

A fire in the back of Tadaka's brain urged his lips to move. "Yes," he said confidently, "we will do what we must."

"Yes," the others echoed—all save Kaede.

Tadaka looked at his sister and saw tears mingling with her sweat. Her long black hair looked damp, lifeless. Turning his face up, Tadaka felt a gentle mist seeping through the magical dome overhead.

"I will not," Kaede said.

"Kaede does not need to open a scroll," Tsuke said. "She'll be far more useful lending support to the rest of us. The Void can give us all the strength to do what we must—the strength to save the Phoenix, and all of Rokugan."

Tomo held his sister with his clear eyes and said, "Kaede, we cannot do this alone. We need you. The clan needs you."

Kaede nodded her assent. "Yes," she said quietly. "I'll do what I can. I'll help."

Tadaka drew a deep breath. He lifted his hands from his knees and spread his arms wide. Though his body shook with exhaustion, he willed it steady before he spoke. "We ask the Sun Goddess to sanctify our decisions," he said. "May the Seven Fortunes bless our actions and preserve our people. This council is at an end."

THE TIDE TURNS

Shiba Ujimitsu backed against the escarpment, a grim smile drawing across his handsome face. The rock behind him was high—too high to leap over. Nor could he vault the vast Shadowlands hoard pressing in around him. All the samurai with him had been killed, and now rose to join his enemies. They brandished rusted weapons and howled for his death. This time, the zombies might get their wish.

Ujimitsu lopped off the head of the skeleton nearest him and smashed its rib cage with his return stroke.

He turned and looked into the dead eyes of Shiba Hiroko. Moments before she had been fighting at his side. Now she swung her katana at his neck, trying to kill him. Ujimitsu parried and kicked her in the chest. Hiroko fell back against her undead companions, knocking several of them down. Others pressed forward to take her place.

Eji thrust a spear through the billowing

sleeve of Ujimitsu's gold and red kimono. The Phoenix Champion had fought beside Eji for years, since the young man first left his father's rice paddy to join the Phoenix army as an ashigaru—a foot soldier.

The spear's blade didn't pierce Ujimitsu's skin, but it slowed his movements enough that another slashing blade found his calf.

The katana belonged to Isawa Taro, a samurai with ten years more experience than the champion. Hatred blazed in Taro's undead eyes as he prepared a more deadly cut.

Ujimitsu grabbed the shaft of Eji's spear and spun, throwing the spearman into Taro. The spear shredded the champion's billowing sleeve as it pulled out, making his arm a better target. As Ujimitsu lopped off Eji's head, a thrown tanto sank into his shoulder.

The Phoenix Champion gasped and spared a glance at the dagger. The wound was deep; the entire blade had pierced the muscle. Thankfully, it had missed the underlying bone. Ujimitsu yanked the tanto out with his left hand and flung it back toward its master, Hiroko.

The undead samurai brought her hands up too late. The dagger pierced her left eye, and she fell back into the scrabbling crowd of damned warriors. She disappeared beneath the black sea of bodies.

Ujimitsu switched his katana to his left hand just in time to parry another attack by Taro. He thrust back and hit his former compatriot on the helmet. Taro staggered backward. The champion spun and kicked an advancing skeleton, shattering it to pieces. The fragments rained on Taro like nails. Pale shards embedded themselves in his dead flesh. The undead Isawa flung up his hands to ward off the debris. He hissed in anger.

Ujimitsu's injured shoulder ached; the wound burned with Shadowlands poison. Taro thrust at Ujimitsu's neck, and then

cut in quick succession at his chest and thigh. The Phoenix Champion parried the first blow and the third. The armor of his chest plate turned aside the second cut—barely.

Sweat trickled down Ujimitsu's brow and into his eyes, clouding his vision. He blinked back the moisture.

Taro came at him again, eyes blazing with supernatural fury.

He slashed through the maddened crowd, slaying several of his compatriots to get to Ujimitsu. He thrust at the Phoenix Champion's neck.

Ujimitsu batted the blade aside with his own. He sliced at Taro's shoulder, but the undead samurai parried. Their swords locked.

Ujimitsu kicked Taro in the shin, breaking the small bone. Taro grinned and bore forward. The strike had left Ujimitsu off balance, and Taro took advantage of that. He cut at the champion's chest and pushed. Ujimitsu parried, but the force of the blow knocked him back.

The Phoenix Champion landed on his seat with a jarring impact. His wounded shoulder throbbed, and the thunder of his own blood filled his ears. He slashed up, and his katana found the soft underside of Taro's right arm.

The blade sank deep and caught on bone. The undead warrior yanked back, and the katana slipped out of Ujimitsu's hand. The Phoenix Champion scrambled to draw his wakizashi. Time seemed to crawl as Taro flipped his blade into his left hand and raised the sword high for a deathblow.

Ujimitsu knew he wouldn't free his own sword in time to parry the cut. Blood thundered in his ears. Taro's sword

descended toward his head.

Suddenly the sword stopped, and Taro began to rise into the air. He flailed wildly, gurgling and hissing. When his feet were as high as the Phoenix Champion's head, he jerked once. Black blood spurted from a new wound in his chest. The point of a long spear emerged from the undead warrior's armor.

Ujimitsu's sight cleared, and he saw a horseman behind the monster. She had spitted Taro on her spear. He squirmed like a fly on a pin and gurgled his anger. Recognizing his savior, Ujimitsu smiled.

Shiba Tsukune thrust her long spear aside, casting Taro under the hooves of one of her fellows. The armored steed crushed the undead warrior into lifelessness. Tsukune rode among the teeming undead with a fresh contingent of Phoenix cavalry. She drew her katana and cut down several creatures. "Quite a reversal," she called to her friend, "my saving you."

Ujimitsu staggered to his feet and warded off several undead with his sword. "I'm grateful for it," he called back to her. "Domo arigato gozaimasu."

"Don't mention it," Tsukune yelled over the din of the battle. "Jump on the back of my horse if you can. We need to get out of here!"

"Be with you in a moment," Ujimitsu said. His hope renewed, he cut right and left with his wakizashi, felling a zombie with each blow. He spun, becoming a living whirlwind, separating limbs from the undead. The ghastly horde fell back to regroup.

Ujimitsu stopped his twirling dance of death; no undead remained within reach. For a moment, he had the space he needed. Quickly, he sheathed his short sword.

The Phoenix Champion crouched low, gathering his strength. He vaulted high into the air, flying over the intervening samurai and landing solidly in the saddle behind Tsukune.

"Nice jump," she said, smiling. Ujimitsu gripped the back of her obi with his right hand. His wounded shoulder howled in protest, but the champion didn't listen.

"Hang on," Tsukune said, "I'll get you out of here in one piece."

"No, wait!" Ujimitsu said. He drew his short sword and pointed to a throng of undead warriors. "Go that way," he said. "There's something I have to do before we go."

Tsukune nodded and spurred her horse forward. Fell samurai clawed at them as they rode, but Ujimitsu and Tsukune chopped off the undeads' limbs as quickly as they rose. Tsukune saw their objective.

In the middle of a band of enemy troops stood Shiba Hiroko, the champion's former friend. Black blood from her ruptured eye streamed down her hellish face. She wailed when she saw the Phoenix Champion, hatred blazing in her one remaining orb. She pushed through the seething crowd toward the living riders.

"Give me your katana," Ujimitsu said to Tsukune. They quickly switched blades. She guided her great war horse through the teeming masses.

Hiroko charged, pushing skeletons and zombies aside. She raised her sword, as if to cut Ujimitsu in half.

Tsukune tightened her grip on the reins and turned the animal so that Ujimitsu could face their undead kinsman. The Phoenix Champion held his sword straight up and parallel to his right ear.

Hiroko brought her sword down in a thunderous cut. Ujimitsu parried, though the blow nearly shook him from the saddle. He forced Hiroko's blade to the left and then reversed, slashing to the right.

Ujimitsu's blade bit deeply into Hiroko's undead neck. Her spine shattered under his blow. The undead woman's head sailed from her shoulders and landed in the mud several paces away. Her body fell to the earth.

The Phoenix Champion cut down several more zombies as Tsukune turned her horse away.

"I couldn't leave her like that," Ujimitsu said, handing Tsukune's katana back to her.

Tsukune nodded. "I understand," she replied. She handed him his own sword, and he sheathed it. "Let's go," she said.

The Phoenix general wheeled her horse and called her cavalry to her. As one they turned and galloped back through the undead, toward their own lines. Many evil troops died under the hooves of their war horses.

Tsukune turned to her friend. "How bad is that wound?"

"Pretty bad," Ujimitsu said, "but I'll live."

Tsukune nodded, and the mail hanging from her steel helmet rattled. "Glad to hear it," she said. "I'd hate to think that I'd saved you from these creatures just to have you die on the back of my horse. Do you need aid?"

"I wouldn't say no to a good shugenja right now," Ujimitsu replied. He used his left hand to bunch his silk kimono against his wound, trying to stanch the flow of blood.

"We have some skilled healers at the back of our lines," she said. "I'll take you there." She turned to her other riders and called, "Help hold the line! We can win a great victory here if we catch them between the rocks and our samurai. Fight on for the Phoenix and for Rokugan! Gambatte!"

The other warriors raised their katanas and shouted, "Gambatte!" They wheeled and rejoined the fray as Tsukune and her horse carried Ujimitsu back through the line.

For long moments, the world swam before the Phoenix Champion's eyes. He concentrated, trying to stop the bleeding and bring his breathing under control. His heart pounded like the hammer of a mighty smith. Sweat poured down his brow. The din of battle merged into a great roar, sound like the sea. He almost didn't hear Tsukune when she spoke to him again.

"Have you heard?" she asked. "*He* is coming!"

"What?" Ujimitsu asked. "Who? Who's coming?"

"*Hoturi*," she said. "Doji Hoturi."

The champion's mind swam, and he fought to comprehend her words. "Hoturi?" he said. "But we've been fighting

against him for weeks—months! It's his minions that nearly killed me just now. If your force hadn't arrived in time...."

"No," Tsukune said, shaking her head. "It's not Hoturi we've been fighting, but some evil twin of the Crane Daimyo, created by dark magic—maho probably."

"How is that possible?" Ujimitsu asked.

Tsukune shrugged. "Who knows?" she said. "I'm no more a shugenja than you are. All I know is that the real Hoturi is on his way. He escaped his captors and has come to join his people."

Ujimitsu shook his head, trying to clear the cobwebs. The long days of battle, the blood loss, the exhaustion, all made him unsure he could trust his senses.

"They say Toturi had a hand in Hoturi's escape," she continued, "though I haven't got the entire story. When we finish off this company of undead, things will settle down. Maybe we can get the whole picture then."

"Maybe," Ujimitsu agreed. He fought down nausea. His body began to shake, a sure sign of shock.

"Hang on," Tsukune said. "We're almost there."

Ujimitsu gripped her obi more tightly and leaned his cheek against her back. Sweat ran down his forehead and into his eyes. He closed them.

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When the Phoenix Champion opened his eyes again, the silk ceiling of a pavilion hung overhead. He lay on a futon. His

right shoulder ached but no longer burned. He wore a padded cotton undergarment. The robe wasn't his usual color, but he didn't feel inclined to argue.

Ujimitsu sat up slowly. As he did so, the flap of the tent opened, and Shiba Tsukune walked in. Her armor was splattered with blood, though none seemed to be her own. She held her steel helmet under her left arm. The mail skirt around the helmet's rim clattered.

Tsukune's dark hair fell over her broad shoulders. A smile creased her grimy face. Her brown eyes flashed in the tent's dim light. "About time you woke up."

"How long was I out?" Ujimitsu asked.

"The better part of a day. How do you feel?"

"Well enough to rejoin the battle," he said.

"The battle's over," Tsukune said. "The field is ours. We won the day." She paused and smiled. "It's about damn time."

He nodded.

"The war's not over, of course," she said. "But with Hoturi—the *real* Hoturi—on our side, I like our chances."

"So do I," Ujimitsu said, rising to his feet.

Tsukune stepped forward, ready to support him. "Sure you're up to that?"

"Yes," he said. "I need to get back to work."

"The Phoenix Champion never rests, eh?" she said, smiling.
"I've got something for you."

"What?" he asked.

"Hold out your hands."

He did. From behind her Tsukune drew a katana and placed it in his outstretched palms. "Your weapon, Ujimitsu-sama," she said. "We recovered it from the battlefield."

"Arigato," he said. He walked to a corner of the tent where his wakizashi rested in a sword stand. Next to the stand lay a red kimono blazoned with his usual fire and feathers. He set down the sword for a moment and pulled the kimono on over his padded undergarment.

As he stretched his arms, pain shot through his right shoulder.

He kept his face passive and ignored it. When he'd finished tying his golden obi, he picked up the swords, sheathed them, and stuffed the weapons into his belt.

"You should take it easy for a couple of days," Tsukune said, concern playing on her handsome face.

Ujimitsu shook his head. "No time," he replied. "There are three different places I should be right now."

"All right," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "But there's one thing you should do before running off to get yourself killed."

"What's that?"

"Hoturi's asked to see you."

Ujimitsu slipped his sandals onto his feet. "All right," he said. "Lead the way."

She pulled back the tent flap and stepped out into the brilliant sunlight of a clear winter afternoon. He followed, shielding his eyes against the glare.

As he passed the threshold, his knees buckled, and pain like lightning shot through his body. The Phoenix Champion fell to the ground, clutching his stomach, trying to keep his guts from spilling out.

The voices of a thousand ancestors filled his ears.

"What is it?" Tsukune cried, kneeling beside him.

Ujimitsu opened his mouth to answer, but no words came out. The voices roared inside his head, each clamoring for attention. They sounded like the surf pounding on the rocky shore near Kyuden Isawa.

"Is it the wound?" Tsukune asked, fear etching her pretty features.

"N-no!" Ujimitsu managed to gasp. "N-not the wound!"

The voices in his head built to a crescendo. Suddenly, he understood.

"What is it, then?" Tsukune asked, anger mixing with her fear. "I'll get a shugenja—"

Ujimitsu reached out and grabbed her arm. "No!" he said. "No shugenja. They can't help." He rose to his knees,

breathing hard.

"Tell me what it is," Tsukune said. "What's wrong?"

"It's not the wound. It's the Soul of Shiba."

"What?" Tsukune asked, her fear turning to confusion.

"The spirit of our champion ancestors," he said, "all of them crying out at once. Something is terribly wrong in our homeland."

Tsukune licked her suddenly dry lips. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as death," he replied. She helped him to his feet.

"I must go," he said.

"What about Hoturi?" Tsukune asked.

"Hoturi will have to wait," he said. "Tell him I'm sorry. I'll try to catch up with him soon. Now, though, I must return home at once."

"What's happening at home?" she asked. "Why must you leave so suddenly?"

"I don't know for certain," he said, "though I fear I may already be too late."

THE BLACK SCROLLS

Isawa Kaede choked back a scream.

"Don't break the circle!" Tadaka hissed through clenched teeth.

Kaede clamped her mouth shut and held tight to her brothers' hands. On the wall of the underground chamber, monstrous shadows danced in the firelight. Sweat poured down the Mistress of the Void's forehead, though her bones felt chilled. Damp hair clung to her face. She bit her lip and focused, willing calmness into her soul. Strength flowed from her into the other Elemental Masters.

Holding her left hand, Tomo looked pale and nervous. His skin was clammy. Tadaka, on her right, looked stern and confident behind his black hood. The Master of Earth's grip was firm and warm.

On the far side of the circle sat Tsuke, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. Uona and Tadaka held the Master of Fire's hands, lending support to him as he chanted.

In their midst lay a single black scroll. As Tsuke wove his spell, the scroll slowly rolled itself open. Green phantoms appeared above the wizened silk—spectral tentacles reaching for the Master of Fire. The lamp at Tsuke's side flared, and the ghostly forms dissolved into the darkness.

On the surface of the scroll, words of power burned with a diseased light. Tsuke's eyes darted over the kanji, absorbing their knowledge. A wicked grin tugged at the corners of his mouth. His breath came in short gasps. A black star sparkled magically at Tsuke's throat—an amulet of protection.

The scroll's pale green tendrils reached out for Tsuke again. The Master of Fire was ready. He inhaled deeply. The smoky tentacles flew to his mouth, and he sucked them into his body. Tsuke clamped his jaw tight and remained absolutely still. Many-limbed shadows scampered across the stone chamber's walls. Red eyes gleamed in the darkness. A voice whispered, "Come!"

Kaede looked around but saw only darkness.

Finally, Tsuke exhaled. The scroll's mystic vapor—now bone-white—hissed out from between his teeth. It rose above his head and lingered there like a crown.

Tsuke coughed. "Not so bad," he said hoarsely. "Not nearly as terrible as I feared. Who's next?"

"I am," said Tadaka.

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Kaede leaned against the wooden rail and walked wearily up the steps from the bowels of the castle.

From the great library below came the chant of Phoenix shugenja. They channeled energy to the four Elemental Masters who studied the open scrolls. These supporting shugenja worked in shifts; as one tired, another would appear from the castle and take her place in the ring. While these twenty-one adepts chanted, the Elemental Masters would need neither food, nor drink, nor sleep. The power of the Phoenix would sustain them.

The blessed circle had worked like this for days now. They would work for weeks, or months if necessary.

Even until the ending of the world, Kaede thought.

Though the enchantment might continue until the leaves bloomed and fell again, Kaede herself had limits. During the past week she'd pressed past those limits. Her body begged for rest. She needed to get out of the library's darkened corridors. Her soul pleaded to see the sky and ocean once more, to feel the wind on her face and taste the sea breeze.

She walked up the mighty oak staircase and into the castle's lower floors. Samurai bowed and whispered supportive prayers to her as she passed. Only when Seppun Ishikawa stepped before her, though, did Kaede raise her eyes.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concern playing across his rugged features.

She nodded. "No .. .Yes ... I just need some fresh air."

"And food, too, more than likely," he said. "Come with me. I'll get you some of both."

She nodded again and put her arm atop his for support. The two of them walked to one of the castle's outer rooms. Ishikawa whispered instructions to a servant they passed on the way, and the woman scurried off to fetch food and drink.

When they entered the room, Ishikawa pulled shut the fusuma screen, and helped Kaede sit on the thick tatami mat.

Kaede looked at the many-paned outer wall of the room and admired the sunlight filtering through the thin paper. "Pull back the shoji, please, Ishikawa," she said.

"Are you sure?" he asked. "It's cold outside."

"It's been so long since I've seen the sun," she said, "my soul aches for it."

He nodded, went to the many-paned paper screen, and pulled it back. Late afternoon sunlight streamed into the room. A harsh wind followed, tugging at Kaede's black hair, billowing it out behind her like a silken cape. Her eyes teared, and she wiped them with the sleeve of her kimono.

Ishikawa took the cloak from his back and put it around her shoulders. Then he turned and sat down next to her. To warm his fingers, he stuck his hands out over the small brazier in the center of the room. Kaede sat placidly, staring out over the Isawa gardens, past the castle wall, to the great sea.

Food came, and Ishikawa rose to take it. He sent the maid away before shutting the screen once more. Then he returned to his spot beside Kaede and laid out the food in small lacquer dishes: natto bean paste, dried fruit, white rice. Ishikawa poured sochu—strong sake—into two cups and set one before each of them.

"You really need to eat something," he said to Kaede.

She nodded and picked up her food, but she ate and drank listlessly. He ate and shifted uncomfortably where he sat, waiting for her to speak.

Finally, she said, "They have sacrificed themselves for me."

"What?" he asked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"Tadaka, Tomo, and the others. They have taken this burden upon themselves so that I would not."

Ishikawa shook his head. "They're all samurai, proud to do their duty—proud to serve your people, and the empire."

She nodded and took a sip of sochu. "Yes, but they have also done it to spare me. They fear this knowledge will taint their souls, and they hope to spare me that evil."

"But you're aiding them," he said encouragingly. "You assist their studies."

"As do many others," she said. "I should do more."

"Your people still need a leader," he said. "Your brothers and the rest can't lead from inside the library."

"Junzo is marching north. Those who stand in his way perish. We need to know how to defeat him. This is the only way. But the cost..." She let her voice trail off, and her eyes wandered farther out to sea.

She stood. "I must return to my duty now," she said.

"Rest a while longer," he urged. "You're no good to them if you're tired."

"No," she said. "I must return. I must stand beside my brothers and my friends. Together we will win through. Together we will fathom the Evil One's secrets. Together we will turn back his dark hand."

"I pray to Amaterasu that is so," Ishikawa said. He slid back the fusuma panel, and they both exited the room. Their path to the great stairway took them near the entrance of the castle. As they passed it, a haggard figure ran up to them.

His hair hung loosely out of his topknot, and his kimono was stained with mud. His face was pale and drawn. Concern furrowed his brow. For a moment, neither Kaede nor Ishikawa recognized Shiba Ujimitsu.

"Kaede," the champion said, gasping for breath, "I came as quickly as I could. You and the others . . . you must not do the terrible thing you're contemplating. You must not open the Black Scrolls."

"You are too late, Ujimitsu," she said. "It is already done."

The Phoenix Champion sank to the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut. "If only I had come sooner!"

Kaede knelt and put her hand on his shoulder. "My friend," she said, "you could not have changed our minds. Do not worry. We have turned all our powers to the task."

Ujimitsu looked up at her. "It will not be enough. I know it. My soul cries out to me with the voices of a thousand years. I knew, even before I spoke to you, that I was too late. I only hoped..."

"You're not too late, Ujimitsu," Kaede said. "Our people still need your strength. I need your help and support." She rose, and he did as well.

The champion inhaled deeply. "What can I do?"

Kaede held Ujimitsu with her dark eyes. "The people are worried. While we have toiled, the rift between the bushi and the shugenja has widened. They have asked to meet with the council, but our studies will not permit it.

"Ishikawa has volunteered to help, but he is an outsider," she continued. "Our people will not listen to him as readily as they will listen to you. You are the Phoenix Champion. Talk to the people, Ujimitsu. Calm their fears. Speak with the voice and backing of the council. See that we are not disturbed."

Ujimitsu bowed. "Hai, Kaede-sama. I will do as you ask."

She bowed in return, though not as low. "Good. I return to my brethren now." She turned and walked away.

"Pray for her, Ishikawa," Ujimitsu whispered.

Ishikawa nodded and said, "I do."

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Isawa Tadaka lifted his head from the silk of his black scroll. Despite the shugenja's chanting, he had slipped into sleep. The fire of the scroll's kanji filled his brain; taint ravaged his body. His lungs ached with the oppressive air of the underground chamber.

In the shadows of the room, he glimpsed a monstrous shape. But when he turned, it had vanished. His head pounded with the intonations of the adepts outside the chamber. He heard something else as well: a soft whisper.

"Call, and I will answer," the voice said. "Ask, and I will grant your every desire."

Did the voice belong to the black scroll? Tadaka shook his head to clear it, but the seductive whisper repeated.

A new shadow flitted across the chamber wall. In its form Tadaka saw serpents, tendrils, teeth. He spun to meet it, a deadly spell forming on his lips.

Isawa Tsuke stood in the door to the chamber, smiling at him. Tadaka let the spell die away. "You know what we must do, of course?" the Master of Fire said, his rich voice filling the room.

Tadaka nodded, and a lock of sweaty black hair slipped from under his hood and fell over his forehead. "Yes, I know."

"The others have felt it, too," Tsuke purred. "Our studies have given us the power we need. They've opened the gates

of knowledge for us. Now we must walk through." The Master of Fire looked drawn, but excitement burned in his eyes.

Uona stepped into the room behind Tsuke; manic joy played on her gaunt face. "Our strength is almost complete," she said. "Just one more step."

On the other side of Tsuke, Tomo appeared. His eyes darted nervously, and his cheekbones stood out, as if the skin had been drawn tightly across his skull. "That step is the most costly, the most terrible. It has driven the Crab mad."

Tadaka's eyes blazed in the darkness. "We are stronger than they."

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Isawa Kaede walked past the chanting shugenja and into the underground council chambers. Days had melded into weeks; time had become irrelevant. Only the Void sustained her in this never-ending moment.

Ujimitsu had brought the bushi and shugenja together, but they still did not agree. The bushi pressed for war, the shugenja for patience and peace. Neither path seemed right to Kaede anymore.

She entered the study chamber and was surprised to see all the other Elemental Masters gathered in the main room. They stood around a low stone table where the four Black Scrolls lay open. Almost irresistibly, Kaede's eyes were drawn to the shimmering kanji on the ancient silks. Green fire burned into her brain, seeking her soul.

Kaede closed her eyes. The Void rushed up to protect her, driving away the darkness. She opened her eyes again and

gazed at the faces of the other Elemental Masters. They looked pale and skeletal, but their eyes blazed with power.

"Brethren," Kaede's said softly.

They turned and gazed at her. The shadows in the room shifted, and for a moment, Kaede imagined she saw an immense, many-tentacled form.

"We've come to a decision," Tadaka announced.

"We have power but need more knowledge," Uona said.

Tsuke nodded. "Enlightenment such as the Crab have. Moment to moment knowledge of the Evil One's plans."

"There is no other way to save our people," Tomo added.

Fear gripped Kaede's heart. Nausea welled up in her stomach.

"You can't mean ..." she said breathlessly.

"Yes," Tadaka replied. "Tomorrow night, we will summon an Oni."

TAINTED VICTORY

Shiba Tsukune drove her katana through the eye socket of a walking corpse. The point of the blade shattered the back of the zombie's skull. The creature's head shook atop its rotting neck. The Phoenix general slashed to her left, and the top of the corpse's skull flew off. The zombie toppled to the earth, dead once more.

Before her, the Fields of the Morning Sun lay strewn with the minions of the false Hoturi. Beside her rode her Phoenix cavalry. They laid into the remainder of the evil troops with gusto, slicing off heads and trampling corpses beneath the hooves of their horses.

All around, a cheer rose from the surviving samurai. Their forces had won. After a long night of death and darkness, the Crane had regained their heritage. Doji Hoturi had reclaimed his rights as daimyo and slain his evil double.

Tsukune laughed and lopped off the head of the only remaining zombie in sight. She raised

her katana high overhead and shouted for joy. She whipped off her helmet and let her long hair blow in the brisk wind. How she wished Ujimitsu could be here with her!

A Phoenix ashigaru ran up to her and offered Tsuke an earthen jar. "I've been saving this for victory," he said, his smile showing several missing teeth.

Tsukune took the jar and put it to her lips. The sake inside wasn't warm enough, but it tasted sweet nonetheless. She drank deeply and handed the jar back to the foot soldier. "Arigato."

He rubbed his unshaved chin and bowed. "Domo arigato, Tsukune-san," he said. He ran off, laughing, to join his fellows, his battered armor clattering as he went.

"Your men seem pleased." The pleasant voice coming from so close to her side startled Tsukune. She turned and saw Doji Hoturi riding beside her, a smile playing across his handsome face.

"They have much to be pleased about, as do you."

Hoturi nodded, and his smile grew wistful. The wind caught his white hair and whipped it around his face. "And much that I am not proud of as well," he said thoughtfully. Then he brightened. "But now is not the time for such things. Enjoy your rest while you may, Tsukime. Soon, the rebuilding begins."

He tugged on his reins, and his horse veered away from the Phoenix general. He spared her one backward glance as he rode away. A sparkle in his eyes reminded her of happier times. She smiled back. Then he turned away and rode off among his troops.

A low moan nearby brought Tsukune back to reality. The wounded, she thought. How could I forget about them?

Looking down, she saw Fumina, a young samurai-ko under her command. Tsukune dismounted and knelt by the woman's side. An enemy sword had opened Fumina's stomach and spilled her intestines.

"Aid! I need aid!" Tsukune called, looking around for a shugenja healer.

"Too late, my general," the dying woman said, blood burbling from her lips. "But at least, we won the day ...!" Fumina's eyes rolled back, and her mouth grew slack.

Tsukune stood and looked at her own gore-spattered hands. She wondered how she would ever wash the blood away. The sun dipped behind the mountains. Tomorrow, the goddess would be reborn—like a phoenix rising from the sea. Tsukune wondered if her kinsmen watched the same sunset. She

wondered if the Phoenix would emerge from the long, dark winter and take their rightful place in the sun.

In her mind, she felt Ujimitsu's presence or, perhaps, his absence. Tsukune wondered about her friend. Where was he now? What was he doing? Was he eating dinner on Kyuden Isawa's western parapets, or was he knee-deep in blood on some forgotten battlefield?

If he truly needed her, would she be there for him again, as he had been so many times for her?

Tsukune pulled her sheathed katana from her obi, stuck the point in the ground, and leaned against the weapon as if it were a staff. The sun dipped below a tall peak, and darkness crept across the land. A shudder passed through Tsukune. It felt as though her samurai soul were crying out in fear. Cold sweat beaded on her body, and she shivered.

She knew in her bones that something terrible had happened to her clan, and she knew that she was powerless to stop it.

STRUGGLE

Isawa Tadaka immersed himself in the bath, but the hot water couldn't wash the taint from his skin. He gazed at his face reflected in the surface of the liquid and barely recognized the man staring back.

Sickly green veins traced across his throat and up his jaw to near his left ear. He frowned and rubbed his stubbly chin. The hand that did the rubbing was gnarled and shot through with green striations. Hideous arteries ran from the fingertips of both hands, nearly to his shoulders. Taint

sprouted up again on his chest, a patchwork of venomous scars.

What have I done to myself? Tadaka thought.

He picked up a vial from the side of the tub and emptied its green powder into the water. Immediately, the bath roiled. Tadaka's skin burned as the jade mixed with the water. He scooped up the caustic liquid and rubbed it over his tainted body. He gritted his teeth

against the pain and chanted a sutra to drive the taint away. For long minutes he burned and scrubbed, scrubbed and burned. When he stopped, the water in the tub was covered with an oily black film.

The Master of Earth rinsed himself off with several buckets of clear water. He stepped onto the low wooden platform next to the round bathtub and looked at his body.

His skin was pink with scrubbing. Signs of the taint had faded to a pale, yellowish color, but they had not vanished entirely. Tadaka doubted he would ever be rid of them. He frowned, dried himself with a cotton towel, and pulled on his fundoshi loincloth.

He dressed quickly and mechanically, donning a crimson kosode, a black hood, and a red kimono decorated with flames and feathers. He fastened his black obi about his waist and stuck his daisho swords into it.

"You know," said a familiar voice, "looking at you, a guy would never know what a wreck you are."

Tadaka spun at the sound and said, "Ob! I thought I'd seen the last of you." Behind his hood, the Master of Earth's face

fought between a smile and a frown. He gritted his teeth.

"Sorry," the mujina said, smiling. "I haven't given up on you yet."

"Well, I've given up on mujina, and other such foolishness," Tadaka said. He pulled on black woolen socks and donned his sandals.

"Does that mean you've given up on yourself as well?" the mujina asked. "Your ancestor lost his name to a demon—remember? Don't make the same mistake."

"Cursed imp!" Tadaka said, his eyes blazing. "What do you know about honor, or duty, or family, or sacrifice?"

"I know you had honor enough not to kill that witch hunter," Ob said. "And you did everything to help those nezumi—including poor Mouse." The mujina flitted around the room and came to hover near the Master of Earth's right shoulder. "I've been watching you since you came home, and I don't like what I see. You haven't been acting like yourself—and it's not just the taint poisoning your blood. You Phoenix think you're so high and mighty, but you're really no more than anyone else—no better, no worse."

Tadaka reached out as quick as a cat to snatch the mujina from the air. His hand passed harmlessly through the small red body.

"See what I mean?" Ob said. "You know you can't touch me—but you're stubborn, and too angry for your own good. Of course, I can't touch you, either. If I could, I'd give you a swift kick in the backside. You know this is a stupid course you're following—but you're too proud and addle-brained to

admit it. The only one with any sense in this whole castle is your sister, Kaede. You should talk to her more."

The samurai shugenja shook his finger at the mujina. "I'll decide whom I talk to," he said angrily.

Ob shrugged. "Suit yourself. But those Elemental Masters are going to get you killed—you, and a whole lot of other people. Sure, they mean well, but—"

"We only do what we must!" Tadaka said.

"What you must? What you must? You're talking about summoning an oni, one of Fu Leng's immortal demons! And why? To add a few more scraps of forbidden knowledge to your lore?" Ob flitted about the room and came to rest on the lip of the wooden bathtub.

"You think you're doing it to save the world, but the truth is you don't know when to stop—just like your ancestor Akuma didn't know when to stop. He thought he could master an oni too, and look what it got him. He's dead, and an evil monster is stalking the land and wearing his name. It was a bad idea—both for him, and for the Phoenix. And this new brainstorm's no better. You'll destroy the world if you're not careful. Hardly worth the risk, if you ask me."

"I didn't ask you!" Tadaka cried. He turned, drawing his jade studded katana in one swift motion. The sword cut the air and sliced the mujina neatly in two.

The dumpy red body wobbled on the edge of the tub for a moment. Then its bottom half fell to the floor. Ob looked down at his missing torso.

"How could you?" he cried. A look of horror and sorrow drew across his small red face. Then the mujina's bisected form slowly dissolved into pink smoke.

Tadaka shivered, though he was not cold. A sneer formed on his dry lips. "I told you I could harm you," he said softly.

"Tadaka!" a harsh voice whispered.

The Master of Earth spun, but saw no one—the bath chamber remained empty.

"Tadaka!" hissed the voice.

The Phoenix shugenja moved to the fusuma separating the bath from his room. He threw it back. No one waited in his chamber. His futon lay undisturbed on the floor; his black lacquered chest rested against the far wall.

The intangible voice laughed. Not a friendly, warm laugh, but a low, mocking rumble.

"Show yourself." Tadaka cried. He stepped into the room and slashed the air with his sword.

"I don't need to show myself Tadaka," the voice said. "I'm you."

"What?" Tadaka snarled. Hideous shadows scampered across the room's painted walls and vanished.

"Don't you recognize me? It hasn't been that long. Now that you've proved your worth, we'll meet again soon. Very soon."

Tadaka's hooded eyes narrowed. "Junzo ... ?"

The voice didn't answer, but the laughter continued, like a thunderstorm receding into the distance.

As the sound faded, Tadaka collapsed to his knees. He looked at his katana. No blood stained the blade. It was as if the mujina had never existed. Perhaps, after all, Ob had been merely a figment of the Master of Earth's imagination.

Tadaka looked at the fist that held his sword. The green striations on the back of his hand flared brightly once more. Clearly the taint ran deep within his soul. No amount of jade or magic could ever wash it away. The best he could hope for was to keep it under control. Perhaps that battle, at least, he could win.

THE ORACLE

Isawa Kaede woke from a terrible nightmare only to find that the nightmare was true. She sat up, clutching her heart. Sweat drenched her, dripping from her chin. She mopped the perspiration from her brow with the sleeve of her kimono. Despite the sweat, she felt overwhelmingly cold.

They would summon an oni—her brothers, Uona, and Tsuke—there was nothing she could do to stop them. Even without her, they would carry on. Tomorrow night, they would meet in the council chamber and call forth a monster. She put her hands to her forehead and tried to rub away the headache that pounded in her brain.

Something tugged at Kaede's mind. She looked around. Darkness consumed her room high in the central tower. An eerie silence hung in the chamber. Kaede's Void-enhanced senses told her she was not alone. Gradually, her eyes adjusted. Two men stood

against the eastern wall. The man on the right was her father, the Nameless One. The man on the left she'd never seen before, but she knew who he was—the Oracle of the Void.

The man who had been Isawa Ujina stood quietly, his left arm dangled at his side. He didn't seem to be breathing. The Nameless One wore a black kimono trimmed with indigo kanji and decorations. His long black hair hung limply over his shoulders. He wore no expression, though the hideous scars burned into the right side of his face seemed to flow in the dim light of the chamber. Behind her father's eyes lurked the spark of life, purpose, and determination.

The Oracle of the Void was an old man—very old. The care of ages wrinkled his face, creasing it until his features could hardly be distinguished from the folds of his skin. He wore a flat black robe with shiny filigree. His robes shifted as with an unfelt wind. He, too, seemed not to breathe—a statue. Only his shining black eyes showed signs of life.

The Mistress of the Void stood. She dared not speak or make any noise.

Simultaneously, both shadowy figures extended a hand—Ujina his left and the Oracle his right. "The time has come to leave," they each said, their hollow voices echoing. "Make your choice."

Kaede looked first at the oracle, and then at her father.

To the Nameless One she said, "Why must I choose, Father? How can I choose? You are my flesh and blood, but the Void is my soul."

"Your paths diverge," the Oracle said, his voice like the wind over the mountains. "You must escape the doom that descends upon the Phoenix. No longer can you serve both family and self."

"The others would destroy you, Kaede," the man who had been Ujina said. "I offer salvation. Follow me."

"He, too, offers destruction," the Oracle said. "The destruction of self-fulfillment, the satisfaction of desire."

Ujina frowned, scars creasing his face into a disturbing patchwork. "I offer power," he said. "The power to change things. The power to save your people—our people. Come with me. I can show you how to save the Phoenix."

"I offer you nothing," the Oracle said. "I offer the peace of inner being and the surety of the Tightness of fortune. No worldly riches will you have if you follow me. All you will have is yourself. But that will be enough."

"You know your brothers are making a mistake," Ujina said. "Let me show you what will happen if their path is not averted." He gestured, and a vision sprang up in Kaede's mind.

Fire! The great palace Kyuden Isawa was burning. Flames leapt up its delicate battlements and ran across the intricate roofs. Smoke filled the gardens and poisoned the air. People fled, burning, or died where they stood—felled by the swords of undead samurai.

Worst of all, the library—the knowledge of a thousand years — burned. Sparks jumped from scroll to scroll, sending blazing embers drifting up to the vaulted ceilings. The shugenja tending the stacks could not prevent the spread of

the flames. Man and woman died in burning agony. Nothing was saved. Nothing.

Kaede gasped and shook her head to clear it of the terrible images. Tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes. She smelled smoke. She coughed and put her hand over her mouth, trying to quiet her stomach.

The Oracle's calm voice broke the hold the vision had on her mind. "Now let me show you what will happen if you follow your father's path."

Again, images sprang up in Kaede's mind. The vision was the same, smoke, and flame, and fire—the destruction of the Great Library, the deaths of her friends and retainers. This time, though, Kaede stood in the center of the blaze, clutching three scrolls to her chest. She laughed, a look of madness in her eyes. Then, she vanished.

Kaede fell to the floor. Her breath came in short gasps.

The man who had been Isawa Ujina looked at the Oracle, hatred blazing in his eyes. He turned back to Kaede. "I can give you knowledge," he said. "Knowledge of life and death, light and darkness. Knowledge of your *mother*."

"My mother?" Kaede asked softly.

"You always wanted to know about her—who she was before she died. I know. I can tell you."

"Yet," the Oracle said calmly, "still you would have nothing. For all he offers, you would have no more than you have now. Your life would be no more complete. You would be no more happy than you are now. I offer you nothing—and everything."

"Come with me," Ujina said, extending his one remaining hand. "The things we could do together ...! The knowledge that could be yours ...! Trust me, my daughter!"

"Trust nothing," the Oracle said. "Trust no one. Find the answer in yourself—in the Void."

Kaede sat on the cold wooden floor, hands propped behind her, barely holding her erect.

The two men stood before her. Her father reached out, stretching to take her hand. The oracle stood placidly, holding out his palm. Ujina's eyes were frantic with need; the Oracle's eyes were pools of blackness.

Kaede rose. She looked at her father, then at the Oracle, and then at her father again. She stepped forward, crossed the short distance, and placed her hand in the hand of the Oracle of the Void.

The Nameless One's face was livid. He looked as though he might scream and shatter the castle's foundations. Yet, he made no sound. Instead, he turned away from his daughter, his body twisting into the darkness. His expression changed. The angry, scarred face dissolved, leaving only relief. The Nameless One turned into the shadows and melted away.

Kaede turned and discovered that the Oracle had vanished as well. She blinked once, twice—unsure she was awake.

A gentle rapping came on the pane of the fusuma door. "Kaede!" a voice whispered. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Ishikawa," she said. "I'm all right." She brushed a damp lock of hair back from her forehead.

"I heard you cry out," he said. "Can I come in? I want to make sure you're okay."

Her visitors had left no indication of their presence. "All right," she whispered, "come ahead." She pulled her obi tight, adjusted the folds of her kimono for modesty and straightened her hair.

Ishikawa slid back the panel of her door and ducked into the room. He slid the fusuma closed. "You look terrible."

"Thank you so much," she replied.

He crossed the short distance between them and, for a moment, looked as though he might hug her.

"I've had a vision," she said. "I must leave the castle."

"Leave the castle?" he said. "Where will you go?"

"Nowhere," she said, "and everywhere."

Ishikawa scratched his head. "You're sure you're all right?"

She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek. "I'm not all right," she said, "but I'm as good as I can be."

"All right then," he said, nodding his head and looking puzzled, "I'll have your servants pack your things for a trip."

She shook her head. "No. This trip I must take alone. No servants. No palanquins. No trunks."

"Kaede, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said, "and everything. I no longer belong here. I've been called by the Oracle of the Void. I must go."

"Tonight?"

"Yes."

"With no servants. Just you and me."

"You can't go, either, Ishikawa. You must remain behind."

"I'd like to see you stop me," he said. "I didn't come this far just to let you wander off on your own."

She smiled. "You're a stubborn man, Seppun Ishikawa—and a good friend. You can accompany my first steps, but once I begin the Way of the Void, we must part"

He nodded. "I'll help you pack. Then we'll go and get a few things from my room."

"All right," she said.

She chose clothes, a few scrolls, and mementos of her brothers: from Tadaka, a jade arrowhead—one of the first he had made; from Tomo, a golden ring he had rescued from a sunken wreck; from her father's gifts, she chose an onyx comb. She took no reminders of the mother she never knew.

Within the hour Kaede and Ishikawa had gathered everything they needed. In the moments before dawn they sneaked through the castle to the outer doors. The palace slumbered. The few guards who saw them took no notice of the Mistress of the Void and the former Captain of the Guard.

Passing through the tall portal in the main hall, Kaede blinked back tears.

"What's wrong?" Ishikawa asked.

"I doubt I will ever see these doors again," she said.

"I'm sure you will," he said, "in time." Nevertheless, he turned and looked back with her. The proud doors stood shut, the guards having closed them after Kaede and Ishikawa passed through. The carved kanji and spells glimmered in the darkness—whispering the strength of the Isawa.

"I'll get us horses," Ishikawa said.

"No need," replied a familiar voice. "I already have them."

Kaede and Ishikawa turned to see Shiba Ujimitsu standing at the castle's main entrance. He held the reins of three fine Unicorn-bred steeds. Kaede and her friend approached the Phoenix Champion.

"I cannot finish the trip with you," Ujimitsu said, "but I would be remiss if I did not see you safely on your way."

Kaede bowed and said, "Thank you, Ujimitsu."

"It would be an honor to ride with you, Ujimitsu-san," Ishikawa said. He, too, bowed. He and Ujimitsu helped Kaede into the saddle. Then they mounted their own horses.

"I packed what provisions I thought we might need," Ujimitsu said.

Kaede nodded.

"How did you know?" Ishikawa asked.

A slight grin tugged at the corners of the Phoenix Champion's mouth. "The Soul of Shiba came to me in a dream and told me to prepare for a journey." He tugged on the reins, and his horse moved forward.

Kaede and Ishikawa did the same.

"Did the dream tell you what the outcome of the journey would be?" Ishikawa asked.

Ujimitsu shook his head.

"One seldom knows the true destination during the beginning of a trip," Kaede said. Her dark eyes held a far-off, dreamlike quality. "And though I wish you could both finish this journey with me, in the end I must travel alone."

Ishikawa looked at her and smiled, admiring her beauty in the predawn light. "I'll go with you as far as the Fortunes allow." "As will I," said Ujimitsu.

Kaede smiled warmly at her brave samurai. Then all three of them turned their faces to the road ahead of them.

THE WAY OF THE PHOENIX

In the council garden atop the highest tower of Kyuden Isawa, Tadaka and the three other Elemental Masters sat on their platforms. They had removed Kaede's platform and repositioned the others so that there would be no gap in the circle—no avenue for the demon to escape once they summoned him.

Again, Tadaka had spoken the words of the rituals that transformed an open-air garden into a sacred place. This time, though, he went further. "I call on the wind, the fire, the water, the earth to be our shield," he said, his voice like thunder in the mountains. Normally, he would have also said, "and the Void to be our guide," but with Kaede absent, they all felt it best to omit this part.

The garden shook. The wind blew. The sky darkened, blotting out all stars. Forces within the bowls of each Elemental Master bubbled high into the air. Bamboo planted around the perimeter of the chamber grew.

Green shoots arched high overhead, forming first a cage and then an impenetrable dome. The barrier closed out the world beyond, encompassing the River of Awakening and the island where the Elemental Masters sat. Shadows filled the newly grown chamber, their darkness broken only by Tsuke's orange fire and a sickly glow from the wizened silk set on Tadaka's left. The wan light emanated from the Black Scroll the Master of Earth had stolen from Junzo's castle. Its connections—so recently sundered—to the dark lands of Fu Leng would help the masters summon the oni they required.

Before them, in the center of the grassy area, the masters had traced a ring of white ash mixed with salt. The circle was three times as wide as a man is tall, and a black lacquer bowl of pure white rice sat in the middle of it—an offering to entice a demon. Small rivulets of blood stained the rice red to add flavor to the sacrifice. The blood belonged to Tadaka.

Concentrating on the circle, the Elemental Masters began to chant. They swayed slightly as they sang, keeping time with the rhythm of the magic. Their eerie harmonies filled the bamboo-domed room.

The kanji on the Black Scroll flared brightly, and the scroll lifted itself off the grassy floor of the chamber. As it floated, its green aura leaked into the ashen circle scribed on the grass. The circle grew bright, scintillating with hues of white, green, and purple.

Tadaka raised his scarred and tainted hands upward, and the circle's light rose, too. The Master of Earth's palm burned where he'd slashed it to provide blood for the oni. He gritted his teeth and continued his chant.

The power formed a shimmering wall around the circle. It was nearly as tall as a man, and the energies swirled and howled like a whirlwind of lost souls. The wall grew taller, stretching up toward the bamboo ceiling. Tadaka thought he saw shapes within the arcane barrier—spirit forms or minor demons—but perhaps it was only a trick of his eyes.

He summoned all the power he could muster to his voice. The chanting of the other masters built to a crescendo. Tadaka touched his fingers over his head and laced them together. The magical wall arched over into a dome more than three times as tall as a man. The barrier wailed and scintillated. It turned green, then purple, then sickly white, then red.

Suddenly, a tentacle of crimson energy lashed out and struck Tadaka in the head. The Master of Earth jerked back, his chant faltering. The red energy seared into his brain, making his body shake like a leaf. Tadaka tried to call out, but he couldn't.

Between Tadaka and the shimmering wall, a mystic portal opened. Through it stepped the corrupt form of Junzo.

Before the others could react, Junzo swept his hands toward them. Iron snakes sprang up around Uona, encircling the Mistress of Air and crushing her before she could utter a word.

Tsuke looked at his arms, only to discover a pustulant disease spreading there. Horror painted his stern face white. He tried to scrape the crawling pestilence off, but that only spread the plague further. It ran up his body, turning his fine silks to sludge, clinging to his skin. His scream became a strangled cry as the disease engulfed him.

Tomo rose to his feet, terror in his clear brown eyes. He pointed his hands at Junzo and changed his chant.

Junzo gestured toward the Master of Water. A ball of scarlet fire sprang from the sorcerer's fingertips. Tomo raised his arms in a warding gesture, too late.

The flames engulfed him, burning the flesh from his bones, turning his sinews to ashes.

In moments, three Elemental Masters were no more. Their bodies vanished, consumed by Junzo's evil spells. The echoes of their deaths hung in the air.

Tadaka leapt to his feet. Junzo turned toward him. Red energy linked them like shackles fastened around their waists. A smile played across the evil shugenja's face. He gestured at the Master of Earth—the same gesture he'd used against Tomo.

But Tadaka was faster. He drew a fresh jade fan from his sleeve and flicked it open. The fireball burst against it and rebounded toward its maker. Junzo lifted his hands, completing the ward barely in time. The fire blackened the

sorcerer's white hair, turning it into ashen clumps. Junzo's skull-like countenance smiled.

"Join me," he said, the words creaking out of his mouth like a door slowly opening. "Together, we will rule the world."

"Never!" Tadaka cried. He threw the fan, its razor edges spinning through the air toward the dark shugenja.

Junzo held up a hand, and the fan shattered against it. He grabbed the red energy that bound them together and snapped it. The crimson aura wrapped nooselike around Tadaka's neck.

Tadaka's hands went to his throat. Energy seared his palms. Thrusting his fingers between neck and coil, he pushed outward and chanted a sundering spell. The ruby aura shattered but remade itself into the shackles that bound Tadaka to Junzo.

Junzo's rotting face drew into a smile. "You are the only one worthy to join me," he said. "All the others are but dust."

The pain of loss welled up in Tadaka's breast. He saw his friends dying again and again at the sorcerer's hands. He howled his agony and blasted it forth with every part of his being.

The spell crashed against Junzo like a swarm of tiny rocks. The shugenja's crimson kimono shredded, and small bits of flesh and bone blew off his body. Holes gaped in his arms and legs. Junzo didn't seem to mind.

Instead, he gathered the bits of himself together in a whirlwind. Chanting, he threw them back against Tadaka. The Master of Earth made warding gestures as bits of Junzo

flew around him like a cyclone. The evil shugenja had transformed the pieces of his flesh into tiny scorpions.

Even through his protective magic, the arachnids' tails flailed at Tadaka. Their stings burned as they penetrated first silk and then flesh.

"Our master will be good to you," Junzo said, "just as he is good to me."

Tadaka summoned a spell to shunt the creatures upward. They flew into the enchanted bamboo ceiling and burst into a shower of sparks and ash.

"Your master will destroy the world," Tadaka replied, almost spitting the words.

"Only a world already doomed to death and war," Junzo said. "Why not remake it again, better than it is now?"

Sweat dripped into Tadaka's eyes. He felt his strength ebbing away. His will was waning, too. Why not remake the world? Surely there was not that much worth saving. The clans fought endlessly among themselves. The land was stripped bare of wealth and fertility. The peasants were little more than ants digging in the soil.

"You have the will, Tadaka," Junzo said. "Join me!"

Tadaka staggered forward, crimson energy binding him to the undead shugenja. His mind felt numb, confused. Junzo's blazing red eyes bored holes into the Master of Earth's brain. Tadaka's hands fell to his sides. His arms felt heavy, as if stones were tied to them. His mouth was parched, his lips cracked. A trickle of blood ran from his lower lip onto his tongue.

Junzo was smiling now, holding his arms out to welcome the Master of Earth like a long-lost brother.

Yes, Tadaka thought. The world is corrupt. Why not wash it clean?

In the sleeve of his kimono, Tadaka's right hand found something cold, hard, and smooth.

Jade.

The green gemstone burned in his mind like a sun.

Tadaka chanted under his breath as he walked slowly toward Junzo. The jade in his sleeve became pliant, soft. It spread over his palm and then the rest of his hand. Soon, it covered the hand completely in a jade gauntlet.

Tadaka stopped, almost touching the evil shugenja.

"Welcome," Junzo said. His rotted teeth gleamed in the red light of the magic. The radiance of the swirling barrier behind him lit his burnt hair like a dark halo. He reached out with worm-eaten arms to encircle the Master of Earth.

Tadaka brought his fist forward with all the strength he could muster. The jade gauntlet slammed into Junzo's breastbone, but it didn't stop there. With a thought, the Master of Earth shattered Junzo's ribs, pushed aside sinews, nerves, and veins—until the jade-gloved hand held his enemy's beating heart.

Tadaka pulled back, ripping the flesh from Junzo's body. Junzo staggered, and his eyes went wide. Tadaka held up the

sorcerer's still-beating heart and crushed it. Black blood flowed down the Master of Earth's arm. A smile crept over Tadaka's hooded lips. Junzo laughed.

THE SUMMONING

The sound struck the Master of Earth like a poisoned shuriken.

Junzo flung his arms wide and said, "You are powerless against me, Tadaka! Join my master and this same power can be yours!" The blood-red aura still bound the two of them together. The scintillating demon-cage behind Junzo painted the sorcerer in hideous pallor.

Fear and rage welled up within the Master of Earth's breast. "Never!" he cried. He ran forward, his hands outstretched. He put his palms on Junzo's shattered chest and shoved with all his remaining might.

Junzo's footing gave way. He staggered back, clutching vainly for Tadaka's arms. The sorcerer's rotting body struck the shimmering barrier. There was a sound like thunder, and Junzo's form splintered into a million fragments.

Still he laughed. The barrier flared as white as the sun, consuming everything in the chamber. Tadaka raised his arms to shield his face as the

world around him exploded. Junzo's laughter turned into a high-pitched wail, like the wind of a typhoon. When the light dimmed, only one sound remained—the sound of voices chanting.

Tadaka opened his eyes and found that he was chanting, too. Sweat poured down his brow and ran across his parched

lips, stinging them. He looked up and saw his hands, still clasped over his head.

With shock, he realized that the chanting voices belonged to the other Elemental Masters. Tomo, Uona, and Tsuke were not dead. He glanced down at them out of the corner of his eyes. They sat serenely on their platforms, unaware of the trials Tadaka had endured.

The battle with Junzo was in my mind alone, Tadaka thought. But was it *real*?

His body ached with combat fatigue. His mind felt weary and confused. Veins of taint burned his body with renewed fury. He summoned his strength and continued the spell.

The Master of Earth lowered his hands and extended them to the sides. The other Elemental Masters brought their hands up to mimic his, forming a ring outside the mystic barrier. As one, they pointed their hands toward the center of the circle.

Within the scintillating wall a form took shape. Green energy sprang up, like a spider poking its head through a hole. It reached out, spreading long tentacles. A blob formed amid the tentacles, a pulsating brain covered by a thin, translucent membrane. The head pushed through the magical hole in space, as though it were an infant being born. Behind it came serrated spikes, the demon's spine.

The oni thrust itself into the magical chamber, a brain on a long snakelike body with tentacles sprouting from its back and two, atrophied arms dangling below its immense head. Its skin was as green as emerald, though the surface was shot through with pink and purple veins. Its huge body coiled within the barrier like a titanic snake.

Suddenly, it sprang.

The oni's head shot forward, bending the barrier outward as if the mystic wall were nothing more than soft silk. The creature's jaws opened, revealing multiple rows of razor teeth. A crimson, rasplike tongue darted out of its maw and assaulted the mystic barrier.

The tongue dripped glowing poison. The Elemental Masters' wall dissolved where the venom touched. The creature hissed its pleasure. Nostrils flared on its eyeless head as it sought victims.

As one, Tadaka and the others rose. They changed their chant; the oni's cage blazed with lightning.

The hideous tongue poked through the barrier. Tomo stepped forward. He gestured toward the monster. Venom on the tongue turned into long nails. The spikes twisted and pinned the tongue to the outside of the barrier. The demon howled in agony.

The oni stretched, flailing its snakelike tail and its many tentacles. The magical wall bulged with the attack, sparking every time it touched the monster's body. The tail pierced the barrier and lashed out. Uona ducked, but the blow shattered the torii standing at the island's edge. Pieces of the great arch splashed into the River of Awakening.

Tentacles followed the tail through the opening in the mystic wall. One reached for Tsuke, but he burned it to cinders. Another grabbed Tadaka's ankle.

The Master of Earth drew his jade-studded katana and sundered the limb. The tentacle writhed on the grass like a

headless snake. Where its blood fell, grass withered and died.

The oni flexed its huge muscles. The spines on its back glowed green and red with magical energy. It bulged up against the walls of its magical cage. Without warning, the barrier exploded.

The force of the blow knocked Tadaka and the others off their feet.

Moving with lightning speed, the creature seized Tadaka in one huge tentacle and drew the Master of Earth toward its mouth.

Tsuke reacted first. Fire blasted from his fingertips, striking the oni in its gaping maw and barely missing Tadaka.

The oni lashed out, smashing the bamboo dome with its tail. Where the tail hit, green sparks flew. The dome shattered, raining bamboo shards down on the Phoenix shugenja.

Uona summoned winds to blow aside the deadly splinters. Bamboo missiles scarred the wooden engawa and embedded themselves in the plastered wall surrounding the sacred garden.

She turned to the oni. Her winds screamed around the monster and grappled with it, forcing the tentacle holding Tadaka away from the creature's mouth.

Tsuke's fire played across the beast's many tendrils, burning them off. As each limb fell, though, another grew to take its place.

The oni bellowed with rage. It flailed around the garden with its blazing tentacles, setting fire to the wooden rail and the pillar near the entryway. Its tail smashed the dragon fountain.

At Tomo's command, the waters of the River of Awakening rose up. They flowed from their pool like a living thing and circled the oni in great coils. The Master of Water chanted power into them, and the coils squeezed.

The oni shrieked in pain.

Tadaka, still held tight in the oni's grip, saw his chance. He reached deep into his soul and summoned the earth beneath the garden's grass and the rock within the castle's walls.

Huge stone spikes sprouted out of the soil below the beast. The first spike pierced the tentacle holding Tadaka. The tentacle's grip faltered. Tadaka wriggled free, falling lightly to the grass below.

Other spikes pierced the monster's body and limbs. Where they struck, the stone formed immense manacles and chains. The demon roared as the rocky links encircled it.

"Change the spell!" Tadaka cried to the others. "Enchant the chains to hold the creature!"

The others obeyed. First water, and then air, and then fire combined with Tadaka's stone, strengthening the oni's bonds. The voices of the Elemental Masters rose as one, drifting into the night air through the shattered bamboo dome.

The creature struggled mightily against its shackles. It bellowed. The sound shook Kyuden Isawa to its foundations.

"Do it now, Tadaka!" Tsuke called. "You *must*, before the bonds give way!"

Tadaka stepped forward and scooped the bowl of bloody rice from where it lay, still untouched, on the grass. He lifted the bowl up before the monster's eyeless snout.

"Oni," Tadaka called, "with bondage I bring sacrifice."

"You cannot bind me!" the oni hissed. "You do not know me!"

"I do know you," the Master of Earth said. "I name you now. You are *Tadaka!*"

For a moment, the immense creature ceased its struggles. It lowered its head, and its huge crimson tongue lapped the bowl out of Tadaka's hand. It tossed the bloodstained rice into its slaving jaws. The razor teeth came down, crushing the delicate bowl into powder.

"Yes," it hissed. "I am Tadaka!"

MONSTERS

It taste your blood on the rice, shugenja," the oni said to Tadaka, its voice as cold as the grave. "Why have you summoned me?"

It flexed its huge body, but the enchanted chains held. The creature growled, a sound like distant thunder.

"We need to know the strategies of Junzo and his evil master," Tadaka said.

The oni laughed, a hideous burbling sound mixed with squeals like those of dying animals. "Why ask me, soulless man?" the beast said. "I am not even a foot soldier in the Great One's army."

"We know what you are, Oni no Tadaka," Uona said. Her voice sounded small and distant, her breathing shallow.

"I smell woman flesh," the Oni said. "So, you are not alone, soulless man. I thought your strength too great for just one."

"Not half alone, monster," Tomo said. He reached up and wiped the cold sweat from his brow with trembling fingers.

"We are the Elemental Masters," Tsuke said. "You will obey our commands."

The oni's immense head turned from side to side, sniffing the air, scanning the destroyed garden. Finally it pointed its head toward Tadaka. "You have many helpers, soulless man," it said. "You must be very weak. What can you give me for this information? I've already eaten your blood. I already have your name."

Tadaka's eyes narrowed. "I can give you . . . this!" Tadaka's jade-studded katana flashed and lopped off one of the oni's tendrils.

The creature shrieked with surprise. It struggled, but the mystic chains held.

"The Evil One's plans, oni . . . !" Tadaka said impatiently. "You're a mind slaver—the brains of Fu Leng's dark armies. You know what Junzo and his minions are planning even now. Tell us!"

"Power you have," said the creature, "but none so great as my master." It wriggled its severed limb, and the lost flesh grew back. The monster smiled, fetid slime dripping from its huge jaws.

Tomo's clear eyes narrowed with anger. "Your master is nothing before us!"

"Just because you heal quickly does not mean you are impervious to pain," Uona said, her voice as cold as the winter wind.

"It only means that you can suffer for all eternity," Tsuke added. His eyes blazed with anticipation.

Tadaka stood stiffly. The taint burned across his limbs. He felt amazed that the others couldn't see it. Still, he refused to give in. If he could resist the power of Junzo, he could resist the seductive poison of the taint. That same strength would give him mastery over the oni.

His heart soared at the thought. He knew now that the Phoenix would triumph. No one could stand in their way.

Tadaka's voice rumbled like an avalanche in the distant mountains. "In the end," he said to the demon, "you will reveal everything we desire."

EPILOGUE

THE WAY OF DARKNESS

The sorcerer uttered a spell, and the bones of the monk before him turned into dust. The man flopped about on the monastery courtyard like an octopus out of water. Then the weight of his own flesh crushed the life out of him.

Junzo's leathery skin pulled back from his teeth in a cruel smile. He enjoyed this part of his revenge immensely. Around him, the screams of the dead and dying echoed off the monastery walls. The blood of monks and priestesses painted the ground, the great torii, and even the roofs of the temple.

Soon the sounds of bones breaking joined the cries of the dying. A hideous slurping followed as Junzo's troops sucked the marrow from the bones of the dead—and some victims who were not so fortunate as to have died yet. The sorcerer rode on his skeletal horse through the blasphemous feast, a priest doling out blessings to grateful petitioners.

A skeletal figure on the back of an onikage rode up to Junzo. The creature's flesh was rotting and burned. It bowed and said, "No scrollsss here massster. Your orderssss?"

"Burn the place, of course," Junzo said, his voice like sand rubbing on wood, "and everyone in it—after you and the troops have had your fun, of course."

The charred specter bowed again and turned his horse away. As he rode through the carnage, his body spontaneously caught fire. He paused briefly to set things alight as he went. The last thing he touched before vanishing from Junzo's sight was the body of a priestess; she had been hung from the great torii by her own hair. Her entrails dangled down past her toes and dusted the ground when the wind stirred them.

A smile cracked Junzo's parchmentlike lips. Some of the Black Scrolls still lay beyond his reach, but his vengeance proceeded apace nonetheless.

Though the dark shugenja coveted the scrolls, they didn't need to be in his possession to do his master's bidding. After all, one stolen scroll had gained him a new ally within the Phoenix. That nicely compensated for his loss.

A refugee peasant came running across the blood-slick courtyard, screaming at the top of his lungs. Junzo watched with pleasure as his bog hounds chased the man down and devoured him alive.

Junzo nodded with gratification. Fragile white hair rustled across his crimson and black kimono as he gazed out across the devastation. Soon, this monastery would be in ruins, but there were more temples to sack, more libraries to burn.

The thought of libraries sent the sorcerer's mind back to Kyuden Isawa and the four Black Scrolls that rested inside the palace's low walls. What, Junzo wondered, had the Elemental Masters been up to since last he looked in on them? It little mattered. They could never muster the power to defeat Junzo's master, the dark god Fu Leng. Even if they were at full strength they could not. Now, without Kaede and with a traitor in their midst, they stood no chance.

Soon Junzo would see the towers of Kyuden Isawa burning. Soon, the great library would be his, or it would be ashes.

The sorcerer smiled a final time, glad he had left one unopened Black Scroll for Tadaka to find.

The demon in a Scorpion's body tugged the reins of his skeletal horse and turned away from the carnage. Guiding his nightmare steed through the fallen gates of the monastery, Yogo Junzo rode off, seeking new targets for his vengeance.